RURAL FUTURES

THE BRITISH COUNTRYSIDE AND ITS POTENTIAL

EDITED BY IGGY WOOD, BEN COOPER, ELOISE SACARES AND MILES WARD

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The countryside charity

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INTRODUCTION

ROGER MORTLOCK

Why should Labour care about the countryside? Looking at its five missions in isolation, you might wonder where rural Britain fits into boosting growth, tackling the climate emergency, building homes, and breaking down barriers to opportunity. But not caring about the countryside is not only to miss a trick – it's to miss some of the heart and soul of Labour values and heritage.

The first reason to care about the countryside is political. Today's Labour party is rural. While no member of the cabinet is from a rural constituency, over 110 Labour MPs represent rural communities. The issues faced in rural communities are the same as those across the country – issues like health, the economy and the cost of living are as important to rural voters as they are to everyone. But rural voters also care about specifically rural issues – like rural infrastructure, affordable rural housing, agriculture, and the environment, which require their own distinct solutions. Yet despite rural Labour MPs now representing a significant proportion of the parliamentary party, with more rural seats than ever before, rural issues have so far failed to get the attention they deserve. The growth mission feels urban in focus; rural communities have been made to feel like 'blockers' thanks to polarising language around housing and infrastructure; and there has been slower progress on issues like agriculture and the environment. As the recently launched Labour Rural Research Group highlighted, much of the ambition for growth will be facilitated or hosted by rural communities, yet the rhetoric tends to focus on dividing lines, often pitting rural against urban communities.

The second reason to care about the countryside is that protecting it has always been Labour's business. The countryside is as politically diverse as anywhere else, and a love of landscapes, nature and wanting a thriving farmed environment should be issues that drive cross-party support. They are also issues where Labour has been a strong leader in the past. Another mission-led Labour government, the post-war Attlee administration, not only founded the NHS and the welfare state, but also

delivered the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 and the Town and Country Planning Act 1947. These foundational pieces of legislation established the protections our countryside still enjoys today. The idea that our most special landscapes should be preserved for the enjoyment of the nation had been a campaign led by organisations like CPRE for decades, but it was the postwar Labour government that made it happen. Likewise, powers given to local authorities to limit urban sprawl, create green belts and create local plans based on local needs are all Labour heritage

The third reason is economic. The rural economy contributes over £300bn a year to England alone, and recent work for the Rural Coalition showed that, with the right policy framework, the rural economy could increase productively further, potentially delivering an additional £50bn to the economy and £19bn in tax revenues. For years, rural England has faced chronic underinvestment, resulting in a widening productivity gap with non-rural areas. Today, the productivity of the rural economy stands at just 82 per cent of its non-rural counterpart, and, without intervention, this figure could drop to 79 per cent by 2040. Rural communities are part of the solution in growing our economy but remain a sleeping giant without the foundations needed for rural growth.

For CPRE, it is vital that people have a sense of belonging to the place they live. In survey after survey, the countryside polls right up there with the NHS as one of the things people most value about living in Britain. CPRE is the only charity dedicated to protecting and enhancing the whole of the English countryside—not just its most famous landscapes, but the everyday countryside that shapes lives and livelihoods.

In 1926, CPRE was founded to protect England's countryside from reckless development, ensuring its beauty, productivity, and value were not lost to short-term thinking. Now, nearly a century later, we find ourselves facing an even greater challenge – not just defending our land, but restoring it. That's why our work now is focused on how we deliver a just transition to climate change, build the right homes in the right places and make the best use of land on our small island.

The climate emergency is the biggest threat to the countryside, with 60 per cent of our best and most versatile land at urgent risk of flooding due to the climate crisis. We need to make the right choices about how we decarbonise. Instead of losing our most productive farmland for solar development (currently 59 per cent of all new solar development), we need to boost rooftop solar on new homes, schools, hospitals, car parks, and make it easier for commercial spaces to benefit, while spreading out solar on the ground across the country. In Germany, over 80 per cent of solar is on rooftops, and is the cheapest form of energy, lowering bills for homeowners every year.

On housing, we have long argued that brownfield land should be the priority for delivering new homes. CPRE's new analysis of brownfield

registers shows that nearly all of Labour's target of 1.5m new homes could be delivered on brownfield sites in England. We think the major reason that greenfield sites are targeted is because that is what suits the economic model of the large developers. We want to see reform of the housing market, with more encouragement for SME builders focused on bringing forward brownfield sites. In the rest of Europe, most homes are custom built by smaller building firms, while here the market is dominated by big players delivering identikit, car-dependent homes which unnecessarily encroach on our countryside.

As Mark Twain said: 'buy land, they're not making it anymore'. In 2021, the Royal Society came to much the same conclusion when they highlighted that we simply don't have enough land to meet all our demands for it. So, in making the case to support the countryside, we need a joined-up approach to make the best use of our finite supply of land. We welcome the work of this government in bringing forward a land use framework, especially one that can work right across government, all departments, and both locally and nationally.

The countryside could and should be a place of opportunity and innovation. It can deliver solutions and help meet targets for nature, people and climate. To do that, however, we need to match the ambition of previous Labour governments, join up our approach to land use, and listen more to rural communities.

Roger Mortlock is the chief executive of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE).

CHAPTER 1

THE RURAL WALL

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter, the Labour MP for Suffolk Coastal and chair of the Labour Rural Research Group, discusses how the land use framework can work for overlooked rural communities

The 2024 general election resulted in a landslide win for Labour, with some of the biggest majorities being overturned in our rural heartlands, such as in South West Norfolk (26,195), South East Cornwall (20,871), and Suffolk Coastal (20,533).

If Johnson's 2019 election win was defined by breaking down the 'red wall', the 2024 result smashed the 'rural wall', which has historically turned out for the Conservatives.

As somebody who grew up in the seat that I now represent, Suffolk Coastal, I know just how seismic that change was. It blew through our local political map like a hurricane, and shattered the myth that only a blue rosette could ever win in rural Britain. A political realignment is in progress – rural voters are more open to change, they are less loyal to political parties, and they will be more significant in the results of future general elections.

But this realignment is something that opposition parties have sniffed out, and that the government needs to grasp. Rural Britain has been chronically underserved, frequently talked down to, and too often had change forced upon it – not by one government, but all governments, and for decades. A 'rural blind spot' has existed even when very senior ministers, including deputy prime ministers and even prime ministers, represented rural constituencies. As an example, just look at the last government.

Policy tends to be designed for larger towns and cities, and it too often fails to really understand rural Britain. Policymakers often struggle to get to grips with the very real barriers that exist for ordinary people trying to access public services, jobs, and wider opportunities in rural areas.

A similar blind spot towards rural Britain exists for developers and corpo-

rations too – with household brands pursuing their next phase of growth from rural areas, led by planning teams based in London, Liverpool or Manchester, and out of touch with the communities that are expected to host their growth. That's not a political slogan: it's a truth that has persisted for decades.

That's one of the many reasons I, along with nearly 30 other Labour MPs drawn from rural and semi-rural areas across England, Scotland and Wales, were motivated to set up the Labour Rural Research Group (LRRG), which I'm delighted to chair. We are determined to make sure that we succeed where others have failed; to rewrite the rules for our rural areas, and to make sure that they are front and centre of this government's mission for inclusive growth and opportunity. Our first report, published over the summer, was a step towards this. Understanding Rural Britain was based on a survey of over 1,400 rural voters, which explored the priorities and concerns of people living in rural areas right across England, Scotland and Wales.

We showed, through our research, that people are proud to live in rural areas. This may not come as a surprise, but it is often overlooked in Whitehall. We found that we value nature and the environment more than city folk, when compared to other similar national surveys with an urban weighting.

But our research also showed that people living in rural areas are also deeply worried about the lack of opportunities for young people – and many fear that for young people to succeed, they need to move away from our rural areas, into larger towns and cities. As someone who grew up in Suffolk Coastal, moved away in my late teens, and returned in my late 30s, this resonates with me deeply.

I know we need to do more to create and sustain opportunities for young people in places like Suffolk Coastal and the UK as a whole. But understanding rural Britain and our complex patchwork of land, culture, identity, and local economies is vital if government and developers are to succeed.

The forthcoming national land use framework must recognise this, and it must strike the right balance between four priorities: farming and food production, renewable energy, housing, and nature restoration.

Too often, these have been framed as mutually exclusive, or competing with each other. But with innovation and joined-up thinking, they can and should complement each other: using community-led renewables, like those pioneered on the Isle of Eigg; or housing design that respects rural character, incorporates biodiversity, and prioritises affordability. These should be starting points for our ambition.

The truth is that one-size-fits-all policy won't work. What is right for Cornwall won't be right for Cumbria. What Suffolk needs won't be the same as what the Highlands does. Local identity and nuance, shaped by community consent, must be at the heart of the framework. If we get the land use framework right, not only can we bring opportunity to our rural regions – we will also have

the potential to solve rural issues by adopting innovations with government support.

Across the globe there are examples that we could, and should, draw on: The Netherlands' Room for the River programme shows how land management, resilience, and biodiversity can be integrated to mutual benefit, while Costa Rica's payments for ecosystem services demonstrate how governments can reward landowners for measures that protect our environment and wildlife, alongside producing food.

Each of these models reflects the same principle: that the countryside is not a zero-sum landscape of competing demands, but a place where multiple priorities can be reconciled – so long as government, policymakers and developers take the time to understand it and its priorities.

The political realignment of 2024 – the crumbling of the 'rural wall' – created an extraordinary opportunity. Rural voters are open to change and they want to be heard. But delivering for rural Britain requires visible improvements: homes people can afford, healthcare delivered closer to where people live, broadband that actually works, and support for a farming industry that craves stability and wants a chance at being profitable. The national land use framework must be ambitious enough to balance competing national priorities, but flexible enough to respect local realities. It must be guided by innovation, but anchored in identity. Above all, it must put rural people at the centre of decision-making, not on the margins.

CHAPTER 2

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT PRICE

Martin Collett, chief executive of the English Rural Housing Association, sets out the case for targeted support and investment in affordable rural housing

Our work as a specialist housing association has shown us that the lack of affordable homes is one of the biggest challenges faced by rural communities. It is unquestionably a fundamental driver behind the housing emergency facing the countryside. Even more so than their urban counterparts, rural areas are characterised by unique housing stock, acute affordability pressures, and social needs that necessitate a tailored approach to housing and planning policy.

The need for affordable housing in rural England is driven by a stark disconnect between local incomes and property prices, with research showing that average property prices are higher in rural areas. As of March 2024, in predominantly rural areas, the median price for a detached property was fourteen times higher than median earnings. This affordability crisis is often compounded by the elevated number of second and empty homes, which remove potential housing stock from the market. In fact, Defra's latest analysis notes that in 2023, there were 16,900 empty dwellings in rural authorities.

The nature of rural housing stock presents another significant challenge. In rural areas, there is a higher proportion of older homes compared to urban areas. In 2020, 28 per cent of rural residential properties were built before 1919, compared to only 18 per cent in urban areas. These older homes, often with features like solid walls, are harder to make energy efficient. As a result, residents face a difficult choice: pay higher heating costs or live in a cold home. This and other factors mean that there is also a higher proportion of "non-decent" homes in rural areas. In 2022, 20 per cent of rural homes failed to meet the Decent Homes Standard, compared to 16 per cent of urban homes. The combination of older, less efficient, and sometimes substandard housing stock means rural residents face not only

greater affordability challenges but also higher running costs, further straining their finances.

The lack of affordable and suitable housing contributes to social and economic pressures, including statutory homelessness and growing local authority housing waiting lists. Research undertaken by the Universities of Kent and Southampton found that rural homelessness had increased by 24 per cent in a single year. In relation to waiting lists, CPRE the Countryside Charity noted that government data recorded in rural areas across England found that these contained 231,00 households, which at current rates would take 82 years to house.

Although, on the face of it, rural housing waiting lists can be marginally lower than those in urban areas, the lack of affordable housing stock makes affordable rural homes a scarcer resource. Just 9 per cent of rural housing is affordable, compared to 17 per cent in urban areas – an imbalance driven by decades of underinvestment and the legacy of right to buy. Unless this issue is solved, a fundamental barrier will remain in retaining young people and essential workers in rural communities – threatening their long-term sustainability.

To address the rural housing crisis, leading advocates and experts have convened a series of targeted policy changes. The belief is that they will increase the supply of affordable homes and ensure the long-term sustainability of rural communities.

These changes focus on planning, funding, and the protection of existing stock. A cornerstone of any successful new approach needs to be a long-term national strategy for a programme of affordable rural house building.

First, planning policies must be adapted to the unique characteristics of rural areas. The government should reduce the size threshold for affordable homes on small sites, which would open up opportunities for small and medium-sized builders. Furthermore, local authorities, including mayoral and combined authorities, should be required to specifically assess the housing needs of rural communities and develop targeted policies to address them.

A crucial part of this is accelerating homes delivered through Rural Exception Sites, which are often the only way to meet housing needs in smaller communities. Research undertaken by UCL highlighted the limited use of this trusted and effective policy, noting that only 17 per cent of local planning authorities used the policy annually, and annual data from 2023 shows the lowest ever delivery levels: a woeful 530 affordable homes. Scaling-up use of Rural Exception Sites offers significant potential and can be achieved by enhancing national planning policy and guidance, alongside reviewing landowner incentives for land sold for affordable housing.

Second, securing adequate grant funding from Homes England is essential. The new Social and Affordable Homes Programme will not have a rural target. To counter this, Homes England should clarify its support for rural affordable housing through a strategic

commitment and clear investment approach in the funding prospectus. Housing associations depend on a flexible, reliable grant process to ensure the viability of rural projects, which often lack economies of scale. Additionally, the government should commit to sustaining a national network of Rural Housing Enablers, who play a critical role in supporting all stakeholders involved in delivering these homes.

Lastly, to protect and sustain the supply of affordable rural homes, a number of measures are necessary. New and existing rural affordable homes should be protected by exempting them from right to buy in smaller rural communities. This would be a direct response to the issue that sales through right to buy have not been replaced, which limits new development opportunities and can make landowners reluctant to sell land for affordable housing. Finally, to combat the rising issue of rural homelessness, strategies need to be adapted to focus on prevention and enhanced data collection.

In conclusion, there is a compelling case for building more affordable rural homes and a clear roadmap for action. High prices relative to earnings, a prevalence of older, less-efficient housing, and an inadequate supply of affordable homes are key drivers of the countryside's housing crisis. Addressing rural housing needs requires a multi-faceted approach: strengthening planning policies to secure more affordable homes from private developments, providing more resources for, and removing barriers to Rural Exception Sites. Finally, we must invest in retrofitting older housing stock for better energy efficiency. By combining these efforts, national and local partners can help ensure rural communities remain not just beautiful landscapes, but also thriving, accessible, and affordable places to live and work.

CHAPTER 3

LABOUR'S OPPORTUNITY OFFERING

Jess Asato MP, the Labour MP for Lowestoft, identifies what Labour needs to do to 'rural-proof' its opportunity mission

Growing up in rural Norfolk, I had a close friend at school. She was whip smart and had big dreams, but in those days, intelligence was not enough – you needed champions, money and parental support. She lacked these things, and faced enormous challenges as a result. My friend was one of the reasons I joined the Labour party in 1997 when it campaigned on the promise of education, education, education. Twenty-seven years later, and with the privilege of representing a semi-rural constituency, I know the importance of improving rural opportunities for our young people.

In our first year in office, the Labour government has restored early-years provision and education policy to the top of the agenda and set ambitious targets on school readiness, attainment, and skills. The expansion of government-funded childcare to 30 hours and the extension of free school meals to half a million more children will lighten the load for families, supporting child development and enabling parents' career growth.

In the 2024 autumn budget, £69m was allocated to Best Start family hubs, which seek to replicate the success of Sure Start by joining up services and providing personalised support. Recruiting 6,500 extra teachers and tightening teaching qualifications will strengthen the next stage of a child's development. Post-16 learning is also being reshaped through the establishment of Skills England, which will simplify qualifications, work with industry to identify skills needs, and train people of all ages for specialist roles.

This renewed energy is welcome, but delivery must consider the unique challenges of rural and coastal life. The government has pledged to 'rural proof' all policy decisions, assessing their impact in rural areas and requiring adjustments to design or delivery where needed.[1] Currently, the index

of multiple deprivation (IMD) used to allocate funding often fails to identify deprivation in rural areas as a result of population dispersion.[2] Struggling families miss out as a result.[3] National issues, such as the school staffing crisis, are exacerbated; essential services from buses to broadband are stretched over wide areas, limiting access to new digital or in-person solutions.

The incoming early years policy will be a step change for rural children's opportunities. The co-location of services being pursued across government will reduce the travel times that hinder all public services in rural and coastal areas; Best Start family hubs and neighbourhood health centres will act as one-stop shops, combining healthcare such as midwifery with breastfeeding and weaning support; and a legal minimum level of provision will introduce services previously inaccessible in rural areas, such as stay-and-play groups, soft play, parenting support, and assistance for children with additional needs. To further 'rural proof' family hubs, we must ensure their reach is wide enough so as not to re-establish childcare deserts. Digital services are often presented as the solution, but these cannot completely replicate in-person support. A combined model, with a locally adapted digital offer, could be an effective way to enhance in-person services. Online services must also act as a gateway, encouraging parents to make the journey when necessary. Reach can also be extended through a hub and spoke model, where outreach teams move around the surrounding area, providing advice and identifying issues in isolated communities.

The opportunity mission must also address the youth exodus from rural areas. Research by CPRE found that most young people thinking of leaving cited problems with their rural area rather than attractions of urban life; poor transport (86 per cent), limited connectivity (76 per cent) and a lack of employment opportunities (84 per cent) were among the top reasons given. In one in five rural areas, house prices are twelve times average earnings, and 54 per cent of rural households are living in financial instability.[4] We must urgently find ways to help young people learn and earn locally, not least because 550,000 rural businesses contribute £315bn to the English economy each year

Children from these areas often outperform their urban peers in school, with more passing their English and maths GCSEs despite having fewer teachers per school, fewer schools overall, and fewer schools rated outstanding. Yet there has been a slowdown in rural students progressing to university.[5] This may be because they face higher costs on average, being less likely to live at home while studying. Limited course options also mean that more rural students study subjects they are less passionate about, resulting in lower attainment and higher costs for later retraining.[6] Non-urban universities also tend to have weaker links to local employers, partly because those employers face less competition for top talent and partly because there are simply fewer employers nearby. Unfortunately, the Tory government oversaw a fall in real-terms spending per

student of more than 12 per cent since 2011 in further education and sixth form colleges.

Better rural education policy would include expanded support for university 'offshoots' and 'spinouts' and other ways of creating economies of scale in rural educational institutions. The government's higher education innovation fund, and the implementation of the recommendations of the Independent Review of University Spinouts,[7] together represent a good start – but I believe we need to go further.

In my constituency of Lowestoft, East Coast college is a strong example of how an institution can adapt in order to offer higher education, further education, apprenticeships and more. It utilises three campuses to reach a wider area, and students can study for A-levels, degrees from the University of Suffolk, and adult learning.

University spinouts are already central to the government's growth strategy, and I welcome them as a way to incentivise specialist learning and create high-paying opportunities outside traditionally wealthy urban areas. On top of the £2.6bn awarded to support spinouts in 2024 – a 40 per cent increase – a further £30m was announced in May 2025, some of which was earmarked for the Agri-tech Commercialisation Ecosystem, which is partly based in East Anglia. Spinouts, research, and innovation companies are proven high-value industries that can thrive outside wealthy urban centres. For example, London accounts for only 19 per cent of England's spinouts. This is slightly above its 15 per cent population share, but far lower than its dominance in finance or law. And innovation clusters have proved successful in rural areas: Yorkshire's healthcare technology sector, and the West Country's defence manufacturing sector, both genuinely compete with the 'golden triangle' of London, Oxford and Cambridge.

There are further opportunities for government policy to incentivise cooperation between education institutions and large projects that utilise the open space of rural constituencies, such as data centres, wind farms, and nuclear power plants. These projects are vocal about their need for a more specialised talent pool and have often benefited from government support. This would give cooperative partners first pick of top talent, a more relevant skills base, and would build local community support. In Suffolk, Sizewell C has enacted this effectively, funding an employability hub at a local college in my constituency, as well as a wellbeing café and employability centre.

Like many people who grew up rurally but moved to a city as a young person, I want to change the landscape that made that decision for me. When I was elected last year, I committed to myself that I would fight for a future in which young people growing up in areas like mine do not need to move away in order to realise their dreams. So many of the young people I talk to love where they are from, and don't want to have to leave. From the moment they are born, we need to be ensuring that they have parity with their urban peers – only then can we truly break down the barriers to opportunity.

CHAPTER 4

UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

Rebecca Munro, director at Pragmatix Advisory – who in 2018 spearheaded the community buyout of the Isle of Ulva – and Mark Pragnell, chair of the Rural Coalition and managing director at Pragmatix Advisory, explore how the government can realise rural economic success

Rural areas are all too often viewed through a narrow lens: picturesque rolling hills, peaceful villages, a slower pace of life. Few see them as drivers of the economy and, for too long, central government has viewed them as cost-centres being propped up by urban powerhouses. This stereotype is both outdated and short-sighted. Across England, rural areas are home to diverse industries, vibrant communities and entrepreneurial and innovative businesses. With the right support and targeted interventions, they could be contributing far more.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

The reality is that rural England is underperforming, because its potential has frequently been overlooked. As it stands, the average rural worker's productivity is only 82 per cent of that of their non-rural counterpart. On current trends, the figure could fall to just 79 per cent by 2040. This productivity gap is not only a problem for rural areas – it is a problem for the national economy, too. The widening productivity gap means the country is missing out on potential growth while generating lower tax revenues.

But a widening of the productivity gap is not inevitable. Instead, the gap presents an opportunity for rural areas to be contributing more. In all sectors but manufacturing, there are lower rates of gross value added per worker in rural areas than there are in non-rural. This demonstrates that the overall gap between rural and non-rural isn't just down to the types of businesses operating in rural areas.

And rural England is not only under-performing in comparison to urban England, as international comparators show. Many comparator nations with

rural areas that experience the same challenges of distance, smaller markets and lack of agglomeration benefits have rural productivity rates much closer to those of their urban areas. Pragmatix Advisory's research for the Rural Coalition estimated that achieving the equivalent rural productivity of G7 countries could mean an additional £9,300 of output per rural worker, while matching the Scandinavian nations would see an additional £11,100 generated per worker. That increase has the potential to generate up to £19bnin additional tax revenue annually, which is enough to fund around half a million nurses. Rural areas can contribute more; it's just a question of whether government is willing to invest in unlocking that potential.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF GROWTH

To help narrow the productivity gap, we must address what is holding rural businesses back. Most rural enterprises are small or micro businesses, with around 85 per cent having nine or fewer employees. These firms are the heart of local economies, but they are facing rising costs, limited access to finance and challenges in recruiting workers.

Supporting these businesses requires more than generic advice. It requires targeted interventions including investment in infrastructure, tailored business support and fair funding that recognises the real cost to local authorities of delivering services in rural areas.

Place-based solutions matter, and nowhere more so than in rural areas. When communities are empowered to have a say in and shape their futures, they are more resilient and innovative. Community-led projects and development, supported by local authorities who have capacity and funding, can unlock economic potential that a one-size-fits all, central approach would miss. Local decision-making in response to local challenges means initiatives stand a much greater chance of success. The people living and working in an area are often the ones best placed to identify solutions to its challenges. For a rural community, its economic sustainability or growth may rest on supporting a cluster of food producers, or investing in gigabit broadband, or helping a village keep open its only childcare provider.

SKILLS ARE A MISSING LINK

A skilled workforce is central to productivity growth, but rural areas face persistent challenges in retaining skilled workers. Fewer rural residents hold undergraduate degrees than their non-rural counterparts and, while a higher proportion do have vocational qualifications, they do not always match the needs of local employers. This mismatch is compounded by barriers to young people accessing higher and further education, limited or non-existent transport links, poor digital connectivity and a narrow choice of courses.

These challenges are not insurmountable; they just require an alternative approach. Hybrid learning, satellite campuses, apprenticeships and employer input into the design and type of training and courses can help to make education more accessible and

relevant for the needs of the local jobs market. We must also move beyond the assumption that rural and urban areas require fundamentally different industrial strategies. With the right support, rural communities can develop the skills needed for high-value sectors in the same way as urban, from manufacturing to green technologies.

GREEN GROWTH WILL COME FROM RURAL ROOTS

Rural economies were traditionally built on industries like agriculture and manufacturing. These continue to be important, but they are now part of a broader, more diverse mix, and one that means rural England is uniquely positioned to lead the country's green transition.

Rural areas have the space, natural resources and expertise to drive growth in sustainable agriculture, eco-tourism and renewable energy. From regenerative farming and conservation jobs, the green economy is already established in rural communities. But its growth is being stifled by limited and fragile power grid capacity, fragmented funding and poor digital connectivity.

Unlocking the potential of green growth will require strategic investment. This cannot just be in infrastructure, but also in skills, promoting career pathways and increasing local capacity. Rural areas can be a major contributor to delivering national climate goals, but they must be equipped with the appropriate tools to do so.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN UNLOCKING RURAL POTENTIAL

This is where central government comes in, not with a universal approach but by supporting place-based policymaking that appropriately reflects the realities of rural life. Too frequently, rural areas are hampered by local government arrangements that often reinforce the rural/urban divide. Functional economic areas don't end at the city limits, and now is the time to be thinking about devolution in this context. There is a real opportunity to reduce the productivity gap between rural and urban areas, and because of the wider global environment, more of a focus than ever should be on rebalancing rural. The question is whether government is ready and willing to invest in unlocking that rural potential.

NB: The article refers to rural England, rather than United Kingdom, as the research the article referenced was conducted for the Rural Coalition for England only.

CHAPTER 5

TECH IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Samantha Niblett, the Labour MP for South Derbyshire and the founder of Labour: Women in Tech, outlines Labour's plan to build a connected, inclusive, and tech-driven Britain

As someone who spent years working in data and technology before entering parliament, and as the founder of Labour: Women in Tech, I have seen first-hand how digital tools can transform lives, communities, and the economy. But I have also seen how the absence of digital infrastructure can entrench inequality and cut people off from opportunity.

Now, as the proud member of parliament for South Derbyshire, a semi-rural constituency, I see those challenges and opportunities more clearly than ever. The new Labour government is committed to building a fairer, greener, more prosperous Britain. That begins with making sure opportunity is not limited by geography, background or postcode.

DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY: THE FOUNDATION OF MODERN OPPORTUNITY

It is no secret that too many parts of our country – particularly rural and semi-rural areas like mine – still suffer from poor broadband, patchy 4G, and almost non-existent 5G coverage. It is not unusual for people in South Derbyshire to struggle to get a mobile phone signal from their home on a new-build estate.

In 2025, that simply isn't acceptable. In a world where children rely on the internet to do their homework, farmers use apps to manage their crops and machinery, and small businesses sell their products globally online, digital exclusion is real-world exclusion.

Labour understands that access to fast, reliable, and affordable internet is no longer a luxury: it is a necessity. That's why we have launched a national connectivity drive to improve broadband infrastructure, prioritising the areas that have been left behind for too long. We will work with local authorities, network providers, and communities to roll out full-fibre broadband and expand 4G and 5G networks, especially in rural and

underserved areas.

This is not just about downloading a film faster. It's about unlocking economic growth, enabling remote healthcare, supporting education and creating new jobs in the digital economy.

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF TECHNOLOGY AND AI

Our new AI action plan is another example of how Labour is thinking long-term about the future of work, innovation, and fairness. AI presents a generational opportunity to grow our economy, improve public services, and create well-paid jobs, but only if we get it right. That means developing responsible AI frameworks, investing in skills and retraining, and ensuring that the benefits of AI are felt across the whole country, not just in a few postcodes in London or the south east. We are supporting businesses large and small to adopt AI technologies that can boost productivity and create new services. I recently welcomed Google to Swadlincote to deliver one of their digital garages to boost skills of small business owners.

We are also investing in regional innovation hubs to ensure people from every background, and every corner of the country can be part of the next wave of technological progress. With Skills England and the skills and growth levy, we are partnering with businesses, schools, colleges and universities to ensure our workforce has the digital and data skills they need to thrive.

I am keen for South Derbyshire to be part of an AI growth zone and to encourage tech companies to come and base themselves here and provide fantastic, secure, well-paid jobs for people right across my constituency. And they are far more likely to do that if there is terrific tech talent here.

As someone who has mentored countless women breaking into tech, I know how transformative this sector can be. But we need to widen the gateway – not just for women, but for people with disabilities, those who took non-traditional career paths (as I did), and those who live outside the traditional tech corridors. Tech must be an engine of inclusion, not exclusion.

Digital exclusion is a particular barrier to opportunity. Whether that exclusion is down to poor connectivity, a lack of skills or knowledge, or data and digital device poverty, this Labour government is committed to digital inclusion, working with brilliant organisations like Good Things Foundation to include more people who have been missing out.

The growth of remote and flexible working is one of the biggest workplace revolutions in generations. It opens up enormous possibilities, especially for people who were previously excluded from traditional work environments. Remote work is also a gamechanger for regions like mine. When connectivity improves, people can build careers in digital, finance, design and marketing without ever needing to relocate to a city. They can stay in their communities, support local economies, and still access high-paying, high-skill jobs. That's why Labour is investing in digital skills training with TechFirst, a £187m

government program set up to equip the UK with the AI and digital skills needed for the future, bringing these skills into the classroom, careers, and communities, focusing on supporting young people and fostering innovation in regional tech hubs.

I want to work closely with employers in our region to promote tech apprenticeships, digital upskilling and job creation. Having spent years working to open doors in the tech sector, I know how vital it is that we create clear, supported pathways into these roles, especially for women, disabled people, and those from working-class backgrounds like mine.

A GOVERNMENT THAT BELIEVES IN POTENTIAL, EVERYWHERE

Labour's vision is simple: we believe that talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not. For too long, Westminster has treated some places as afterthoughts, particularly when it comes to investment in skills, infrastructure and digital innovation. That changes now.

Our approach isn't top-down or one-size-fits-all. We are empowering local leaders, working with businesses and community groups, and listening to people on the ground to make sure our policies reflect real needs and unlock real potential. As someone who built a career in data and technology before entering politics, I know how much can be achieved when the right tools are in the right hands. Technology can connect people, power businesses and improve lives, but only if we build the infrastructure and support systems to make that possible.

This is the promise of a Labour government: that no matter where you live, what your background is or the challenges you face, you will have access to the tools, training, and technology you need to succeed. We are just getting started, and I am excited to work with my constituents to make sure that our semi-rural community plays a leading role in building the fairer, greener, more connected future – one that only Labour can deliver.

CHAPTER 6

LOCAL LINCHPINS

Ben Cooper, research manager at the Fabian Society, explains what the government can do to rejuvenate rural high streets

For decades, the high street has been central to the life of rural communities across England. It is a place where people live, work, and socialise, and it provides access to jobs, services, and culture. It remains foundational to daily life for many people. Perhaps more than that, it creates sense of belonging and is a source of pride for communities.

Like those in more urban areas, rural high streets have experienced significant change in recent years. The rise of online shopping, changing consumer trends, and the collapse of numerous major high street chains have all had a negative impact. Rural areas, in particular, have suffered from a loss of key public services, many of which shifted from the high street to online.

The evidence shows just how under-served rural communities are when it comes to many high street amenities and services. Research by Health Equity North and the Northern Health Science Alliance found a 16 per cent reduction in the number of retail units overall between 2014 and 2024, and a 57 per cent reduction in the number of banks. As a result, rural communities had 38 retail units and 0.3 banks per 10,000 people in 202, compared to 43 retails units and 1.2 banks in the most urban conurbations in England. Rural areas also have fewer pharmacies, department stores, and supermarkets compared to urban areas.

The loss of services and retail from the high street has a knock-on effect on those who remain, as empty shops deter potential visitors and ultimately reduce footfall. Rural England CIC found the closure of high street businesses encouraged rural residents to travel to nearby towns or cities, with the closure of rural bank branches significantly impacting footfall in the towns and the viability of their high street.[8]

The result is a downward spiral, where fewer and fewer people regularly visit their local high street in rural

areas. Polling by Ipsos Mori found just over a third (35 per cent) per cent of respondents living in rural areas visited their local high street or shopping area more than once a week – compared to 49 per cent of respondents in urban areas.[9]

Many people in rural areas think they lack access to crucial amenities in their local high street. For example, Ipsos Mori also found 66 per cent of rural respondents said there were too few 'good quality shopping options generally' – compared to 4 per cent saying too many. Just over a quarter (28 per cent) said there was the right amount.

A struggling high street with growing numbers of empty properties and a lack of choice is a very visible indicator of economic decline. It serves as a tangible barometer for wider economic success or stagnation – one that is perhaps more easily understood than national GDP statistics.

Struggling high streets also have a political impact, with visible local decline increasing support for right-wing populists. Research has found a clear link between high street vacancy rates, and support for the Ukip between 2009 and 2019.[10] There are early indications that Reform could be similarly building their support in such areas.[11] With so many Labour MPs now representing rural communities, improving the high street must be a significant part of the government's rural agenda.

Over the past year, the government has made significant progress to improve high streets across England. A community right to buy is being introduced, making it easier to bring valued assets such as empty shops or shuttered pubs into community ownership. Councils can hold rental auctions to auction off leases of long-term vacant premises in their town centres, potentially without landlord consent. And the government is committed to rolling out 350 banking hubs by 2029, which maintain access to face-to-face banking services in communities hit hard by bank branch closures.

Over the remainder of this parliament, the government should go further to guarantee basic levels of service provision on the high street in rural areas. Face-to-face services remain essential. The government should establish what we have called 'NeighbourHubs' to bring together essential public and private services in a single location. They would build on banking hubs, and other examples of co-located services across rural England.

These Hubs would lower the costs for public services and businesses to serve smaller, sparser communities, and keep them accessible. NeighbourHubs could utilise empty buildings on the high street, occupying assets which contribute to the identity of a community, or which have proven difficult to fill. The exact provision of services in each Hub should be determined by councils, in partnership with those who experience disadvantage. Central government funding could be provided to enable the purchase of empty high street assets, so NeighbourHubs can find a permanent home in rural communities.

Delivering improvements to rural high streets is one way that this government can make a significant, tangible contribution to the lives of people across the country. NeighbourHubs can be part of the answer, ensuring everyone can access the basic services they need to live a good life.

CHAPTER 7

MISSING LINKS

Eloise Sacares, former senior researcher at the Fabian Society, sets out how to expand low-carbon transport in rural areas

Nearly 10 million people live in rural England – more than in Greater London. But while London has seen its buses improve in recent years, bus services in rural areas declined by 18 per cent between 2019 and 2024, exceeding the reduction across the country as a whole. For many, inadequate public transport provision has left them with few options other than private car use.

This matters. Transport emits more carbon emissions than any other sector of our economy, and 60 per cent of domestic transport emissions come from cars or taxis.[12] Petrol and diesel vehicles also create significant air pollution, even in small towns and villages.

Reducing emissions from transport in rural areas is a huge opportunity for net zero, and the countryside wants to be part of the transition. According to the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit, around 73 per cent of rural voters are concerned about climate change – a slightly higher rate than the general population (70 per cent).[13] But due to a lack of public provision, many rural communities are locked into car dependency. This has significant wellbeing consequences. Those unable to drive – often due to disability, old age, or unaffordability – face barriers to accessing essential services, social opportunities, and independence. Further, rural residents wanting to transition to an electric vehicle face both physical and psychological barriers to doing so.

There are two immediate steps this government must take to improve lives and reduce emissions from rural transport: enhancing rural bus provision, and making the transition to electric vehicles accessible to everyone.

ENHANCING RURAL BUS PROVISION

Investing in better rural buses can revitalise communities by attracting tourism, creating new jobs, and

supporting economic growth. Research by the Confederation of Passenger Transport estimated that £9.2bn of local spending would be lost if bus services were unavailable. They also suggest that every £1 of public funding spent on bus improvements can generate £4.55 in economic benefits.[14] There is a clear business case, then, for enhancing bus provision in rural communities.

The reforms in the government's 'better buses' bill are welcome. Devolving franchising powers to local authorities has had great success in London and combined authorities such as Greater Manchester. But in rural communities, it may put pressure on already cash-strapped local authorities and make little difference to the provision of services.

Reforms to funding must accompany reforms to franchising. A new funding settlement is needed to ensure the viability of rural transport. During the previous parliament, rural areas received just half the per capita funding of urban areas. Organisations such as the Campaign for Better Transport and Green Alliance have campaigned for sufficient funding to guarantee a minimum level of bus services for every community. The House of Commons transport committee suggest a rural weighting in the government's funding formulas as a practical way to tackle these inequalities. Minimum bus service levels are popular with the public: according to Campaign for Better Transport, 87 per cent of people agree that this should be guaranteed for every community – with only 11 per cent disagreeing.[15]

But the question of how to green rural transport cannot be solved by a one-size-fits-all approach. While some people would greatly benefit from increased public transport, others see private vehicles as essential to their independence or the running of their small businesses. For these people, increasing sustainability is more likely to mean switching to electric vehicles. Currently, however, a lack of suitable charging infrastructure means switching to an EV feels out of bounds for many people.

MAKING EVS ACCESSIBLE TO EVERYONE

The transition to EVs must be accessible to everyone. Currently, seven in 10 rural residents feel locked out of the transition to EVs. This is unsurprising: 43 per cent of public charge points are clustered in London and the south-east. Because rural drivers are more likely to need to go longer distances, they are more likely to face 'range' anxiety about buying an electric vehicle. This is despite fewer than 2 per cent of EV breakdowns in 2024 being caused by a lack of charge, according to the AA. However, as fewer people in rural areas have firsthand EV experience, there is widespread scepticism about their practicality for long-range driving.

It is also vital to improve the accessibility of EV chargers where they exist so that everyone in rural communities, particularly those who are older or disabled, can access them. Disabled people are often unable to access public chargers due to accessibility issues, including cables becoming heavier with

the deployment of fast-charging cables. The Public Accounts Committee found that the needs of drivers with disabilities have not been met in the rollout to date, with no charge points fully compliant with the Motability Foundation's minimum accessibility standard.

Greater investment in providing public charging points in rural areas; making accessibility standards mandatory; and more widespread awareness of the unlikeliness of running out of charge could all help ensure EVs are seen as a practical alternative for all rural road users.

The evidence is clear: better rural transport is not only vital for meeting net zero targets, but for tackling social exclusion, revitalising local economies, and improving quality of life. Rural communities must not miss out on this opportunity. The Climate Change Committee has shown that significant emissions savings in surface transport are required to reach net zero before 2030, and this will not be possible without rural areas playing a key role. Guaranteeing a minimum level of rural bus services through fair funding and increasing the accessibility and attractiveness of electric vehicles for rural drivers are two starting points.

CHAPTER 8

CAREFUL BALANCE

Alison Hume, the Labour MP for Scarborough and Whitby, sets out how tourism can promote sustainable coastal economies

Tourism is often the lifeblood of seaside towns, providing income, jobs, and a sense of identity that shapes everyday life for residents. In North Yorkshire, which includes Scarborough and Whitby, the visitor economy contributed more than £4bn in 2023, attracting 31 million visitors and supporting nearly 40,000 jobs. These headline figures show why local councils, businesses, and communities prioritise attracting and managing visitors: the benefits reach far beyond the hospitality sector, underpinning retail, transport, cultural organisations, and supply chains that together keep towns functioning year-round.

One of the most tangible advantages of tourism is the quality and accessibility of employment it creates. Research indicates tourism offers higher-quality roles than other sectors with similar qualification profiles, such as retail and administration. It also provides routes into work for young people and for people from a wide range of educational backgrounds, helping to retain local talent that might otherwise leave for cities. Local festivals and attractions create seasonal and permanent roles in hospitality, events management, maintenance, and creative industries, strengthening social cohesion and providing sustainable career paths for residents.

Helping young and unemployed people into work has become increasingly important post-COVID. Apprenticeships offer an excellent way to recruit new entrants into the industry, providing practical training and experience. Yet smaller businesses often cannot offer these opportunities due to concerns about bureaucracy and funding. It is therefore vital to support them in developing these schemes.

Seasonality remains a persistent problem. Summer peaks produce heavy demand for services, strained infrastructure, and vastly fluctuating

incomes, while winters can leave businesses and workers exposed. Coastal towns, however, are becoming increasingly inventive in response, finding ways to stretch the season through events and niche markets. Whitby's goth weekends in April and October, for example, demonstrate how themed events can attract visitors outside the traditional summer months, generating over £1m for the town each year. Similarly, Scarborough's Lights Festival – held from November into December and attracting more than 150,000 visitors last year – shows how well-produced winter events can sustain footfall, job creation, and local pride throughout the colder months.

More broadly, destination management and strategic planning are crucial to balancing visitor demand with community needs. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for coastal communities, I am coordinating the call for a coastal communities minister and a dedicated coastal strategy encompassing investment, skills development, transport links, better access to public health and environmental protections.

Crucially, tourism needs to promote sustainable local economies rather than undermine them. The popularity of towns like Whitby and Scarborough with holidaymakers has led to a significant increase in short-term rentals, particularly through platforms like Airbnb. While these rentals boost local income and provide flexible accommodation options, their proliferation and lack of regulation have adverse social and economic effects, including reducing the availability of housing for residents who live and work in the area year-round. Evidence of this strain is clear in Whitby, where the year-round population declined from 13,213 in 2011 to 12,595 in 2021. On 20 August, only 11 properties were available for long-term rent in Whitby, compared to hundreds listed as short-term lettings. Of those 11, just three were priced at under £1,000 per month.

This surge in holiday lets has pushed up rental prices, making it difficult for local residents – especially young people, workers, and families – to afford housing. Many find themselves priced out of their own communities, which impacts the economic stability of towns like Whitby and diminishes social cohesion as communities become dominated by transient visitors. This dynamic discourages new residents from settling in the area, hampers local workforce development, and threatens the sustainability of the very tourism that creates demand for short-term lets.

For coastal communities to thrive, employees need somewhere to live, and businesses need people to employ. That's why I've been calling for the government to introduce a licencing regime and new planning powers for councils to regulate short-term lets. Licencing could empower councils to limit the number of homes converted into holiday lets, incentivise property owners to rent to local people and prevent communities from emptying during the off season.

I have added my name in support of Rachael Maskell's short-term let accommodation bill, which aims to

make provision for the licensing of short-term let accommodation, regulate its marketing, introduce planning permission requirements, and publish guidance on the management of these properties. Additionally, the bill proposes measures related to small business rates relief for short-term lets, ensuring fair contribution from these properties to local economies.

Of course, the lack of affordable housing in coastal towns cannot be understood outside of the broader context of the national housing crisis, exacerbated by stalled housebuilding under consecutive Conservative governments. This Labour government's mission to build 1.5m homes will undoubtedly provide much-needed relief to an overheated housing market, and that change is already underway – in Cayton, a seaside town just outside Scarborough, the government's New Homes Accelerator programme is supporting the development of 2,500 new homes.

It is vital that this government pursues a housing strategy that recognises both the pressures and opportunities of coastal regions. If we want to ensure that growth is delivered in all parts of the country, sustainable housebuilding coupled with a licencing regime will be instrumental in unlocking the potential of our coastal economies.

Tourism is a vital economic driver and a source of community pride and vibrancy, but without careful planning, we will continue to see local residents priced out of their own communities. In many cases, it won't just be the fish and chip shop closing early because of a staff shortages –the towns themselves will be transformed into one-dimensional theme parks, which tourists will reject because they lack authenticity.

On the other hand, supported by the right strategy and the right regulations, tourism can boost our economies, create sustainable jobs, and generate growth in coastal communities like Scarborough and Whitby. It can ensure that visitors get to enjoy all our coastal towns have to offer, while simultaneously making them a truly great place to live.

CHAPTER 9

PICTURE OF HEALTH

Kerry Booth, chief executive of the rural services network, sets out a vision for an NHS that doesn't leave rural areas behind

"Support and care when you need it, in a way that is accessible to you." This would be my simple vision of an NHS fit for the future, whether in a rural or an urban setting. What will differ between these settings is how such a vision can be realised – and the challenges you will face in doing so.

The government faces several key difficulties when it comes to health and care in rural areas. This article will focus on three key issues that must be addressed.

First, we must improve access to services. If I am feeling unwell and need help, my first point of call is the GP. Appointments, however, must often now be booked online, a task that seems deceptively simple – unless, of course, you can't access the internet. According to the Connected Nations Report 2024, gigabit-capable broadband is available to 88 per cent of urban premises in England, compared to only 54 per cent of rural. Moreover, 10 per cent of rural premises can't access superfast broadband, compared to only 1 per cent of urban.

Even before an appointment has been made, then, rural populations face barriers to accessing NHS services – a problem that becomes all the more stark when we account for the digital skills that ageing residents often lack, making valuable tools such as the NHS app difficult to use.

Another key aspect of accessing health care is transport. Over recent years, we have seen a centralisation of services, meaning that rural residents have to travel further to receive specialist treatment. To make matters worse, research by the County Council Network shows that one fifth of 'lifeline' bus routes serving residents in county and rural areas have disappeared over the last five years, which can make something as simple as getting to your local GP or pharmacy an enormous challenge.

A second, and equally pressing challenge, is the struggle to recruit and retain health and care workers in rural areas, a problem which is compounded by the lack of infrastructure to support both workers and their families.

Rural communities, as elsewhere in the UK, are currently suffering from a shortage of affordable housing, and in tourist hot spots, the abundance of Airbnb and short-term lets are leaving workers locked out of the long-term rental market. In fact, while rural areas make up 18 per cent of the population, they receive just 10 per cent of affordable homes. Ageing populations in rural areas also mean that the labour market is proportionally smaller, and with the centralisation of specialist services, rural placements are perceived as having a lack of career progression.

The third and perhaps most important challenge is funding. Rural areas have been underfunded for decades, partly because the additional cost of delivering services outside of towns and cities has not been fully recognised. Local authorities, which provide so many services that support the health and wellbeing of our communities, from supplying affordable homes to delivering public transport and providing leisure facilities, are struggling to deliver. Government funded spending power is 40 per cent more in urban areas per head than in rural ones; services cost more to deliver when you consider travel times and the need to provide more service centres across geographically dispersed communities. On average, in 2025-26 urban areas will receive 15.8 per cent more in social care grants per head than rural areas.

The demographic pressures of an ageing rural population place additional demands on services. Age UK estimates that 2 million people aged 65 or over have unmet needs for care and support for simple everyday tasks, leaving those people vulnerable to falls, and a devastating impact on their wellbeing and ability to take part in normal life.

Public health allocations of funding to local authorities for 2025-2026 show that predominantly rural areas receive £49 per head compared to £75 per head for urban authorities. This may constrain a council's capacity to invest in preventative measures that mitigate more serious issues later on.

The government's 10-year health plan for England aims to tackle these very challenges. Among its areas of action it includes a focus on preventative care and public health, digital innovation and technology and workforce development.

However, the most significant barrier for rural communities in accessing the benefits of a revitalised NHS will be whether the government acknowledges that the challenges faced in rural areas require distinct solutions compared to urban settings. For example, many of the actions in the 10-year plan to improve digital connectivity focus on improvements to the NHS app, using continuous monitoring of patients in their home. Yet without reliable broadband or mobile coverage, these innovations will simply bypass rural communities. If the government is to transform public health through digital technology, it needs to look at the

bigger picture and ensure that everyone has access to broadband and mobile services that they need – especially those in rural areas.

If we want a motivated health and care workforce, willing to put down roots in rural areas, workers need to have homes that they can afford with access to key infrastructure such as schools, transport, and jobs for their partners. Above all, we need to ensure that we deliver the right type of homes, with secure tenures in flourishing communities, that provide the right environment for our workforce.

Finally, we need to ensure that rural public health and care services are adequately funded, while recognising the unique challenges and cost pressures that come with delivering services to dispersed communities. The answer may be more health centres in rural areas, each serving less people, but enabling rural residents to access support when they need it.

This government has stated that deprivation drives demands on services, and we need to recognise that deprivation is not just located in our cities, but is in our rural communities too.

Delivering on the 10-year plan will require structural changes within the NHS, but it also demands a shift in mindset. We must move away from the image of rural England as a 'chocolate-box' rural idyll and recognise that these areas are often deprived, with ageing populations, and limited to access care.

Only by acknowledging these realities and designing solutions that work for dispersed and ageing populations can we be confident this plan delivers for everyone. By acknowledging the facts of rural life, we can build a health and care system that is truly 'fit for the future' – one that reaches both town and country and ensures all communities can thrive.

CASE STUDY

LESSONS FROM CORNWALL

CHAPTER 10

GOING GREEN

Perran Moon, the Labour MP for Camborne and Redruth, highlights Cornwall's importance to Britain's green energy future

The image of Cornwall in the British cultural imagination is a land of sandy beaches, pasties, surfing and slick Rick Stein restaurants. In other words, a coastal idyll – great for staycations and prosperous second-home owners but little else. The reality, beyond the picture-postcard, is quite different. Cornwall is a post-industrial, low wage, largely forgotten Duchy (never 'county'!). London is closer to Middlesborough than Camborne, and despite being part of the 'south-west', Camborne is three hours from Bristol.

When I arrived in Westminster, I was staggered by the lack of knowledge of our cultural history, with some quite senior politicians unaware that we have our own language, which is taught in schools and celebrated in place names and public buildings. The truth is that we are a proud Celtic nation with a distinct culture and heritage encapsulated in our Council of Europe national minority status. It's not that we are anti-English; we're just not English.

For decades now, Cornwall's economy has relied on its world-renowned beauty. This has proved both a blessing and a curse, bringing second homes, short term lets (we have more Airbnb listings than anywhere in the UK outside London) and seasonal employment. Yet today, Cornwall finds itself smack bang in the centre of the Labour government's industrial strategy. The staggering range of clean energy opportunities has led some to speculate that this could be the moment to unleash 'the Cornish Celtic Tiger'.

The most obvious focus is critical minerals. In a previous industrial age, Cornwall was the country's centre of economic growth, and the mining towns of Camborne and Redruth were described as the wealthiest places in the world. However, when global supply chains shifted commodity prices and undercut domestic labour, it was left exposed. Fast forward to 2025 and the

deposits of tin and lithium originally mapped out by 19th-century miners are becoming commercially viable once again. The IEA's Critical Minerals Outlook predicts that demand for tin, lithium, copper, nickel, is set to double or triple by 2040 under net-zero scenarios. With the majority of these resources highly concentrated in global supply chains in regions that pose serious geopolitical, environmental, or ethical concerns, Cornwall has the potential to be placed at the heart of emerging supply chains and developments in green technology.

This potential can be seen in the whole host of clean energy technologies being developed in Cornwall to transition the British economy away from fossil fuels. The mighty Celtic Sea is poised to become a powerhouse of renewable energy: with deep waters and strong winds, it is perfectly placed to host floating offshore wind farms. Labour's commitment to accelerate offshore wind will include ensuring local supply chains and operation and maintenance capabilities in ports like Falmouth and Hayle.

A hitherto totally overlooked resource is geothermal energy, which could offer a vast, stable, low-carbon energy source. Cornwall sits atop a geological gift: the Cornubian batholith, an enormous mass of granite rock, channels heat from the earth's mantle closer to the surface, reducing drilling costs. Geothermal resources are already being tapped at sites like United Downs, near Redruth. Labour's industrial strategy backs innovation in geothermal, supporting research, infrastructure, and community-owned energy models that keep profits local while reducing reliance on fossil fuels.

Decarbonising heating is one of the toughest challenges in rural areas like Cornwall, where homes are often off the gas grid and relying on expensive, carbon-intensive fuels. But here, too, Cornwall offers unique opportunities. The same geology that makes Cornwall ideal for geothermal energy also supports the deployment of ground source heat pumps (GSHPs) – a technology that extracts heat from the ground to warm homes efficiently. With Labour's commitment to retrofit and achieve rural energy justice, GSHPs will be scaled up in areas where they make the most sense.

Meanwhile, hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO) offers a pragmatic, low-carbon alternative for existing oil boilers, especially in older homes where full electrification is not yet viable. Labour's approach is not one-size-fits-all. Instead, it is about deploying the right technology in the right place, with local needs put front and centre.

These heating solutions can complement Cornwall's clean energy ecosystem – from lithium extraction to offshore wind and geothermal – to make the Duchy not just a consumer of clean energy but a massive producer and innovator.

In other areas – such as North Sea oil year gas – the emphasis is on transitioning investment and employment away from carbon-intensive sectors. In Cornwall, there is a stronger focus on job creation through clean energy strategies. Earlier this year, the National

Wealth Fund invested £28.6m in the South Crofty tin mine. Closed since 1998, the mine boasts huge deposits of the highest-grade unmined tin in the world. Tin is a key component in all electrical devices and increasingly used in the production of solar panels, but currently, the UK's tin is imported from far across the globe.

A broader cluster of innovative mining companies involved in other minerals like lithium and tungsten are also employing local people across the supply chain, supporting a new wave of geologists, engineers and researchers. From critical mineral extraction underground to wind energy off the coast, Cornwall is ready to play its part in the transition to a post-fossil fuel economy. The task is vast, but the prize is priceless: energy security, which reduces our dependence on volatile international markets; climate action, which secures the materials we need for clean technologies; and jobs and regeneration in Cornish communities. Reducing economic disparities between the UK's regions goes hand in hand with delivering opportunity to people in rural and remote coastal areas like Cornwall. This must mean not just developing skills, but building communities where those skills are rewarded.

I may be a little biased, but I find it difficult to overstate the value that Cornwall's clean energy industries can offer the UK's economy. The Labour government is not just recognising this potential; it is backing it financially. By investing in remote coastal innovation, infrastructure, and industry, Labour is ensuring places like Cornwall are no longer left behind, but lead the way towards Britain's clean energy future.

CHAPTER 11

TIDES OF CHANGE

Jayne Kirkham, the Labour and Co-operative MP for Truro and Falmouth, details the trailblazing role of Cornish local authorities

Due to our distinct identity as a Celtic nation, Cornwall has been a trailblazer in rural devolution and local government reorganisation. This process started in 2009, when Cornwall underwent major local government consolidation, transitioning from a county council and six district and borough councils into to a single unitary authority. The new council initially comprised 123 elected members serving a population of approximately 530,000. By 2021, that was reduced to 87 members, despite the population having risen to over 570,000. Cornwall is now the third largest unitary authority in the country by population and the fourth largest by area. It is the twelfth least densely populated of the 62 unitary authorities.

In recognition of its unique culture and distinctive language, in 2014, Cornwall was granted national minority status by the UK government under the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. A year later, the country's first non-metropolitan devolution deal was agreed between Cornwall council and the coalition government. In 2023, Cornwall council was offered a Level 3 devolution deal. After a public consultation in which 69 per cent of of 6,105 respondents opposed the proposal, the council declined the Level 3 deal offered and instead opted for a Level 2 deal, which does not necessitate a directly elected mayor. (Level 2 devolution would roughly equate to a Foundation Level of devolution under this government's English devolution and community empowerment bill.)

Cornwall was also lucky enough to benefit from roughly £1bn of EU Objective 1 structural funding before 2020. This enabled the development of structures and expertise to administer those funds and plan for economic growth, put in place projects to support businesses and help people back

into work, and invest in community initiatives. That makes us uniquely placed to take on more devolution.

Much progress has been made since Cornwall signed its first devolution deal in 2015. With all of England set to benefit from some form of devolved powers under the government's plans, despite Cornwall's differences, there are lessons to be learned from our experience – not least because we have benefited from devolution in a number of ways.

First, in rural areas, public transport is vital. It allows children to get to school, adults to get to work, and apprentices to get to college. Under a commercial model, important routes often are not viable; a devolved regime can choose to prioritise them and tailor services to local need.

Cornwall was awarded the power to franchise buses in our 2015 devolution deal. Although it has not yet been fully utilised, it has enabled Cornwall council to enter into enhanced partnership agreements with bus companies that have worked better than purely commercial ones. Bus patronage has risen from 9.6 million to 11.75 million, and Cornwall was the first rural area to introduce smart ticketing.

Second, rural households often have distinct energy needs compared to those in urban areas. Cornwall has a high proportion of properties not connected to the gas grid, and rural houses tend to be larger and less energy efficient, costing more to heat as a result. Cornwall council has been able to use its devolution powers to tackle fuel poverty, benefiting from the ability to make tailored energy efficient improvements to housing under the 2015 deal. Its £11.5m fund been able to overcome some of the shortcomings of more traditional, one-size fits all energy efficiency programmes and reduce fuel costs for vulnerable households.

Furthermore, devolution has helped Cornwall develop our abundant sources of renewable energy, through the establishment of the Cornwall FLOW Commission, a marine enterprise zone, and a £18.6m clean energy pilot investing in geothermal.

Housing is another area where devolution can make a real difference – and a gap in Cornwall's current powers. The 'strategic place partnerships' signed by mayoral authorities with Homes England give them far greater control over what is built and where. This allows councils to shape development to meet local needs, including raising grant funding for infrastructure and delivering urgently needed affordable and social housing. At the coalface of the housing crisis, with around 27,000 families on the social housing waiting list and over 800 households still in emergency or temporary accommodation, devolved housing powers would be greatly welcomed in Cornwall.

I am also excited by the 'community right to buy' powers contained in the English devolution and community empowerment bill, which could be transformative for rural and coastal areas. In Cornwall, I know of groups who are interested in buying Methodist chapels, pubs and village halls, and will be able to do so under the new legislation, with community groups having

right of first refusal and up to 12 months to purchase assets of community value. This will be a powerful new tool to protect the spaces that matter most to local people.

TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS

Alongside Cornwall's 2015 and 2023 devolution deals, one of the most visible consequences of local government reorganisation in Cornwall has been the establishment of a large rural unitary council and its withdrawal from all but the most statutory of services in the austerity era.

This meant that third-tier town and parish councils at the grassroots of local government had to step up and take the reins to prevent the sell-off and closure of leisure centres, green spaces, toilets, libraries, and youth services – in other words, all the infrastructure that makes our towns special.

Without its smaller councils, Cornwall would now have no skateparks, and its libraries and parks would be gone. There would also be much less public realm CCTV, fewer community events, and fewer municipal buildings. Even Pendennis Headland in Falmouth was devolved for £1, along with the leisure centre that stood upon it. Innovative partnerships were created which saw town councils coming together with BIDs and community groups at a local level to restore or support services. They hired street rangers, environmental wardens, and youth and community workers to plug the gaps left by the withdrawal of the unitary authority and the cuts to services. Some Cornish town councils, which generally represent a population of roughly 20,000, now have turnovers in the millions of pounds and employ upwards of 100 people directly. Nationally, some of the largest and most active local councils are now in Cornwall.

What has developed, almost as a matter of necessity, is a further level of devolution – 'double devolution', so to speak. It may have developed in an ad hoc and bespoke way, but it works. Decisions are made right in the town they concern, with local buy-in. As decisions are made on art and culture, youth services, and wardens and CCTV to protect streets and businesses, more and more people are standing to become town councillors to help influence the running of these services. This is particularly true in Falmouth, where we have a brilliant town council. Our third-tier councils are no longer solely full of retired men – not that their experience and help isn't very welcome!

There are still issues that need sorting out. Third-tier councillors get no pay or expenses. Their conduct issues can clog up first-tier council monitoring officers' desks, who have no teeth to sort them out. Precepts for town councils have grown significantly larger than those in rural parishes, even though parish residents often rely on services provided in the towns. This is inequitable, and a product of out-of-date urban boundaries that need reviewing. Third-tier councils are not always recognised or trusted to be the recipients of direct external funding. However, having the services run by the people who use them and live with them works.

Cornwall's recent history as a

devolution trailblazer means that we have many lessons to impart of real value for rural and coastal areas. There is, however, a long way to go – it sometimes feels that our devolution journey has only just started.

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ENDNOTES

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The Fabian Society is an independent left-leaning think tank and a democratic membership society with over 6,000 members. We influence political and public thinking and provide a space for broad and open-minded debate. We publish insight, analysis and opinion; conduct research and undertake major policy inquiries; convene conferences, speaker meetings and roundtables; and facilitate member debate and activism across the UK.

The countryside charity

RURAL FUTURES

EDITED BY IGGY WOOD, BEN COOPER, ELOISE SACARES, AND MILES WARD

Rural Britain is often neglected in discussions about the big issues of the day. Yet it sits at the heart of the government's missions to green the economy, boost growth, deliver housing and break down barriers to opportunity.

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