



Commission for  
Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

Planning for  
Sustainable Rural  
Communities

# The big picture



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## **About us**

The Commission for Rural Communities was established in April 2005 and became an independent body on 1 October 2006, following the enactment of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act.

Our role is to provide well-informed, independent advice to government and ensure that policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England, with a particular focus on tackling disadvantage.

We have three key functions:

**Rural advocate:**

the voice for rural people, businesses and communities.

**Expert advisor:**

giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others.

**Independent watchdog:**

monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

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## Planning for Sustainable Rural Communities

This leaflet outlines the Commission for Rural Communities' (CRC's) position on what we mean by sustainable rural communities; and **what changes we believe are needed to relevant policies and practice** to make progress towards making rural communities more sustainable.

It builds on our previous discussion document *Planning for sustainable rural communities: a new agenda (CRC 45) June 2007* and the conversations and debates we have had at numerous conferences, workshops and 'round table' meetings with individual bodies.

Those discussions and conversations have not ended. But the feedback we have received so far shows that there is considerable support for our line of thinking; namely, that although urban areas have undoubted advantages that can support more sustainable development, **rural development has been excessively constrained** by policies which lack convincing evidence, and which fail to acknowledge and exploit rural strengths and opportunities for sustainable development.

This leaflet:

- summarises the **issues** as we see them;
- identifies the **key policies and practices** which we think need to be changed;
- explains **what the CRC is doing**; and
- invites further discussion and collaboration.

# 1

## Where have we come from?

The post-war UK planning system has been very successful in protecting the English countryside – and agriculture – from development.

However, there has been a downside to this success, one that was predicted by one of the dissenting authors of the post-war rural planning regime:

***“The main rural problems will come from the lack of a solid and diverse economic base in the countryside”***  
(Professor Dennison, minority report from the Scott Committee 1942).

This perceptive insight underpins many of the problems of rural England – much rehearsed – such as low wages, a lack of affordable housing, and declining services. It also resonates with many of the **myths and false assumptions** which we have been highlighting in our work, as set out below:

## Planning for sustainable rural communities – some myths and false assumptions

Assumption	Reality
That the economy of rural England is dominated by agriculture and land-based activities	<b>False:</b> Agriculture accounts for no more than 2.8% of employment in rural areas, and less than 20% in land-based occupations (including tourism)
That rural England is in danger of being ‘concreted over’	<b>False:</b> It would take many decades for urban expansion to take up more than an additional one or two per cent of the land, even at current rates of expansion
That rural services are not financially viable	<b>Only partly true:</b> and often based on unimaginative ‘silo’ accounting, and failing to take into account the true social value of existing services eg post offices (and urban areas suffer equally badly)
That private transport creates unacceptable carbon emissions	<b>Only partly true:</b> and only marginally worse than urban areas ie this is a problem for everybody
That for all these reasons rural communities are inherently ‘unsustainable’	<b>Not proven:</b> rural communities offer many ways to face up to the carbon challenge (food, water, energy etc), deliver economic wellbeing (diverse employment in attractive environments) and social and cultural richness (strong communities). Sustainability is as much to do with individual lifestyles as urban or rural locations per se

# 2

## Looking Ahead

History can explain much of the present. But planning for sustainable communities of the future must also take account of our changing economic, social and physical environment.

For the foreseeable future (say 5-10 years) it is likely that many **people will continue to be attracted to rural areas** as pleasant, tranquil places to live (and work). Moreover, **enhanced IT availability** will help to facilitate further home working, learning, shopping, access to services and leisure.

### However, there will be many challenging problems:

- An **ageing population** with increased demands on health and social services.
- Continued **loss of young people**, driven by a **lack of affordable housing** and limited opportunities or access to **employment, training and entertainment**.
- Growing **social and economic marginalisation** of those on lower incomes and limited mobility, such as the unemployed, the housebound, migrant workers and travellers.
- **Higher fuel costs**, and possible **carbon rationing**, which will impact on rural car use, especially rural businesses and those on lower incomes.
- Continued **globalisation** of markets and culture which link rural people to the wider world (for example through IT links or by providing markets for rural businesses), but may heighten the **disconnections** between people and their locality.
- Increased physical **pressures on rural areas** to provide food, water supply and drainage, energy (wind and biomass), recreation, together with land and infrastructure for new homes and businesses (eg eco-towns and villages).
- Finally, but most urgently, rural communities (equally with urban areas) will need to face the challenges of **climate change and reducing carbon emissions**.



Eden Project – the new face of rural enterprise.

We know that rural communities have great potential for diversifying and enriching their local economies, for example through home working and new kinds of rural enterprise.

In the longer term (10-50 years) there are likely to be more profound changes and impacts on rural communities resulting from both **climate change** (eg rising water levels and flooding, more violent weather changes etc) and **technological change** (eg carbon neutral cars, more IT).

But in the medium term the prospects are likely to depend on how different **global economic forces** are played out locally. On the one hand, the dominant socio-economic drivers are pushing for greater individual incomes, choice and mobility, supported by economic 'growth models', cheap motoring and air travel; on the other hand, the urgency and 'inconvenient truth' of the **carbon challenge** is forcing a total rethink on our habits of consumption of goods, services and energy which may result in a serious switch to 'going local' in order to reduce travel – whether for employment, food production or leisure.

**How are we to face up to these challenges?  
Have we got the right policies?  
Do we need a new vision?**

# 3

## Is there a vision for sustainable rural communities?

There will be many visions for sustainable rural communities, and the CRC is not pursuing any single, specific model. Rather, we wish to illuminate alternative approaches and enable rural communities themselves to pursue their own aspirations.

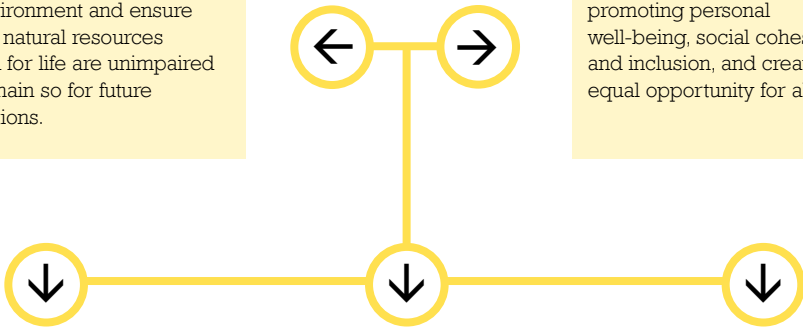
Our starting point is that sustainable communities are about social, cultural and economic wellbeing as well as environmental imperatives, as expressed in the Government's framework (UK Sustainable Development Strategy, 2005 - see below):

### Living within environmental limits

Respecting the limits of the planet's environment, resources and biodiversity – to improve our environment and ensure that the natural resources needed for life are unimpaired and remain so for future generations.

### Ensuring a strong, healthy and just society

Meeting the diverse needs of all people in existing and future communities, promoting personal well-being, social cohesion and inclusion, and creating equal opportunity for all.



### Achieving a sustainable economy

Building a strong, stable and sustainable economy which provides prosperity and opportunities for all, and which environmental and social costs fall on those who impose them (polluter pays) and efficient resource use is incentivised.

### Using sound science responsibly

Ensuring policy is developed and implemented on the basis of strong scientific evidence, whilst taking into account scientific uncertainty (through the precautionary principle) as well as public attitudes and values.

### Promoting good governance

Actively promoting effective, participative systems of governance in all levels of society – engaging people's creativity, energy, and diversity.

The Government's view of what constitutes a sustainable community was agreed at the 'Bristol Accord' (UK Presidency EU Ministerial Informal on Sustainable Communities 2005) as follows:

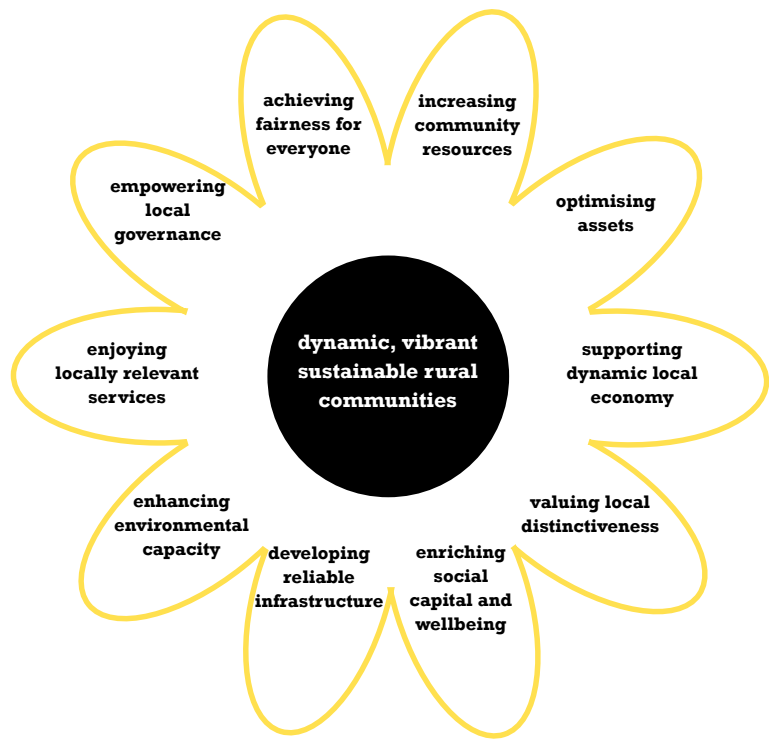
- **Active, inclusive, and safe** – fair, tolerant and cohesive with a strong local culture and other shared community activities.
- **Well run** – with effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership.
- **Well connected** – with good transport services and communication linking people to jobs, schools, health and other services.
- **Well served** – with public, private, community and voluntary services that are appropriate to people's needs and accessible to all.
- **Environmentally sensitive** – providing places for people to live that are considerate of the environment.
- **Thriving** – with a flourishing, diverse and innovative local economy.
- **Well designed and built** – featuring high quality built and natural environment.
- **Fair for everyone** – including those in other communities, now and in the future.

In listing these characteristics of a sustainable community, the Government accepted that sustainable communities are very diverse and that there is no standard template to fit them all. We agree. Nor is it likely that *all* communities will score highly on all these characteristics.

Furthermore, we argue that **rural communities are just as likely to score highly on most of them as urban ones** – both actually and potentially.

A vision of an ideal sustainable rural community has been developed by the Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development, which identified 10 characteristics of the sustainable rural community of the future. It is based on a comprehensive consultation on the challenges and opportunities facing local rural communities across the UK and Ireland as illustrated in the 'petal diagram' (above right)

Many of these characteristics reflect the **positive qualities and potential** of rural communities (an 'asset building' approach) as well as problems which need addressing. The report acknowledges that realistically, no single community is likely to display all these characteristics, but they provide a sound basis for the Carnegie Charter for Rural Communities incorporating some 37 specific recommendations for policy change.



We conclude that **there is no single vision**. Instead, we can form visions for particular places from a comprehensive array of characteristics and criteria, some more essential than others. For example, there may be minimum carbon targets, or affordable housing needs, which are not negotiable; alternatively, there may be cultural aims which are aspirational rather than absolute. It will also be important to encourage local community-led visions, and help bridge them to wider regional and national aims. This in turn will call for more effective methods of participatory engagement in community planning.

**Our challenge is to chart a course by which rural communities, equally with urban communities, can become more sustainable in the future.**

# 4

## What policy changes are needed?

The CRC may not subscribe to a single vision, but we do believe that there is a **vital and urgent need for changes and improvements to policies** at national, regional and local levels if rural communities are to be helped to become more sustainable. The most important changes are very briefly outlined on the opposite page.

In proposing these changes, we are arguing that rural communities are not inherently 'unsustainable'. Judged by some criteria such as security from crime, a pleasant environment in which to live, and community 'neighbourliness' – all qualities of life which existing and potential residents rate very highly – they can be very sustainable indeed.

At the same time they face severe challenges in other areas of sustainability – notably the difficulty of providing services such as schools and shops over small, dispersed settlements, and the high reliance on motor vehicles for access. **Equally with urban communities, they must face up to the 'carbon challenge'**.

The key word here is 'equally'. Rural communities should not be denied development on the basis of unsubstantiated notion of 'rural unsustainability'. Robust evidence must be obtained and analysed.

There is another challenge, too. Although today's rural communities are much more bound up with cities and towns – for example through commuting, shopping and leisure trips – than they were, say, 50 years ago, **'mainstream' policy delivery more often than not needs to be tailored to the specific nature of rural situations.** (See over).

**Equally with urban areas, rural communities must face up to the 'carbon challenge'.**

**To see rural communities benefit from a successful mainstreaming approach, there are several important considerations:**

- Affordable housing needs to be planned carefully in small rural communities which are sensitive to change, and where there are less economies of scale.
- Rapidly changing rural economies need to be properly understood – for example the growth of home working, the need for access to good training, and the availability of suitable premises – if economic investment policies are to make sense for rural communities.
- Full account should be made for the crucial *social and community* roles of rural services such as schools, the village shops/post offices and their contribution to local wellbeing.
- Rural transport often fails to link properly to wider regional and national networks.
- Rural disadvantage is often ‘below the policy radar’ because it is spread thinly over many dispersed settlements and is not picked up by surveys.

To summarise, we believe that there are several critical tasks facing the formulation and delivery of policy – impacting on the sustainability of rural communities:

1. Ensure that there is an adequate evidence base for all policies and decisions affecting rural communities, based on **comprehensive sustainability appraisals** which include all social, economic, cultural and environmental criteria.
2. Ensure that all proposed policies and decisions are **‘rural proofed’** by taking into account rural conditions and circumstances.
3. Ensure that the assumed advantages of urban agglomeration are subjected to rigorous appraisal with regard to sustainable development.
4. Ensure that spatial planning fully incorporates and reflects economic, social, cultural and community aspirations - especially, for example, in **Regional Strategies and Local Development Frameworks**.

# 5

## The Six to Fix

We list below six policy arenas where we believe specific changes would contribute most to making rural communities more sustainable;

### Rural policy changes – the big six

# 1

The **economic potential** of rural communities should be promoted and supported much more vigorously at all levels in order to provide a greater range of well paid, secure employment – for example, through better access to training, business advice and marketing, and promoting live-work units. This will be especially important to retain young people and reduce commuting. Key policy instruments and arenas:

- Sub-National Review and creation of integrated regional strategies led by RDAs.
- Development of Local Authorities' economic wellbeing function.

# 2

**Affordable housing** remains a serious problem for rural communities despite decades of research, analysis and policy interventions. Greater efforts will be needed to 'make it happen' at national, regional and local levels. Key policy instruments and arenas:

- National Rural Housing Advisory Group.
- Regional Housing and Spatial Strategies.
- Sub-regional housing needs assessments.
- Local Development Frameworks.
- Local support and facilitation of rural housing provision.

# 3

**Many rural services** continue to decline. Although there are great opportunities for IT-based services such as home shopping, or assistive technologies such as computerised health diagnoses, there is a longstanding trend towards the concentration of key facilities in urban areas. More imagination is needed to realise new ways of delivering localised services, including moves away from narrow 'vertical silo' accounting. Key policy instruments and arenas:

- Delivery of public services, eg NHS reforms.
- Community engagement in service delivery, eg Community Empowerment White Paper.
- Community Strategies and Local Area Agreements

## 4

Similarly, although government has recognised the importance of **rural transport** (for example, increased funding for rural buses from 1998, and encouragement for rural transport initiatives via Local Transport Plans) there has been no convincing strategic approach to developing **a more integrated transport system which links rural areas to wider regional and national networks**. Key policy instruments and arenas:

- Local Transport Plans.
- Local Community Strategies.

## 5

On the **physical environment**, we must ensure that the Government's policies addressing **climate change and the carbon challenge** do not treat rural areas unfairly, and indeed **recognise and promote the contribution which rural areas can make** – whether through physical resources such as water, food, flood control, carbon sinks and sources of renewable energy, or through the actions of rural communities themselves. Key policy instruments and arenas:

- Regional Spatial Strategies.
- Local Development Frameworks.
- Sustainability appraisals.

## 6

Finally, **cohesive, empowered and active communities** in which people can influence the decisions that effect their locality are at the heart of the Government's vision for Britain. We must ensure that the policies and processes for realising this vision really work for rural England. Although the frameworks and processes are in place on paper, there is real concern that they are not actually happening on the ground. Key policy instruments and arenas:

- Community Empowerment White Paper.
- Sustainable Community Strategies.
- Community-led initiatives such as Parish Plans (and bridging them to the above).

# 6

## What we are doing

This leaflet has limited itself to the headline policy issues. But the CRC is working in some depth on all these policy arenas – see below – and will publish more detailed policy statements in due course.

### CRC research and policy development on sustainable rural communities

- The overall **policy debate**: reports, conferences and 'round tables'  
**contact Trevor Cherrett or Chris Kolek**
- **Spatial planning**: Regional Strategies, Local Development Frameworks and Sustainability Appraisals; Community Planning  
**contact Trevor Cherrett or Alison Rood**
- **Rural economies**: Analyses of performance and policy needs; Report to PM June 2006  
**contact Roger Turner or Chris Kolek**
- **Housing**: national policy and programmes, regional targets, local facilitation and good practice; advice to Matthew Taylor MP (reporting to PM in July 2008)  
**contact Jo Lavis or Trevor Cherrett**
- **Transport**: commissioned 'thinkpieces' on rural transport issues and possible policies in the context of the carbon challenge  
**contact Malcolm Craig or Gordon Stokes**
- **Rural services**: monitoring change; understanding disadvantage; exploring new ways of delivery  
**contact Jaki Bayly or David Land**
- **Land, climate change and rural communities**: exploring the relationship between rural communities and the land, and how they can face up to the challenges of climate change  
**contact Chris Kolek**
- **Representation and decision making**: Participation Inquiry Follow up; Community Empowerment (forthcoming White Paper); rural proofing decision making, implications of the Sub-National Review  
**contact Laura Jacobs**

# 7

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## **In conclusion**

We believe that there *is* a new agenda for rural communities which faces up to the enormous 'carbon challenge' and which they share with urban communities; recognises the contribution which rural areas make to that task as well as the changes in policy and behaviour which are needed; and yet also addresses the persistent social and economic problems (and opportunities) experienced by rural communities.

**This brief 'prospectus' attempts to set out that new agenda, the direction of travel we have embarked on, and the specific policies and actions which we believe need to be pursued.**

The CRC is actively involved through its wide-ranging work programme, alongside many partners and stakeholders at all levels. Out of this further research and debate we will be publishing more detailed findings, recommendations and good practice in the future.

We hope that the messages we are sending in this 'Big Picture' are well received, and that many other bodies will want to work with us on our journey towards more sustainable rural communities.

If you would like to find out more, please contact Alison Rood or Chris Kolek on 01242 521381. Or see the CRC website at [www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk)

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