



Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State
Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

9th December 2022

Dear Secretary of State,

I write to you as the president of the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), which represents 27,000 rural businesses across England and Wales. The CLA welcomes the leveling up agenda; it needs to tackle differentials not just between the north and the south, but also between urban and rural areas of the country.

We are concerned that the planning section of the Levelling up and Regeneration Bill falls short of addressing the needs of rural areas. This Bill should be a real opportunity to remove some of the planning barriers (e.g. time extensions, excessive upfront survey costs) that have held back the rural economy for decades.

The rural economy is 19% less productive than the national average according to D statistics. Closing this gap would add around £43bn to the economy in England alone. Rural businesses face many structural barriers to their success, and in many areas poverty and deprivation are severe, but often remain hidden. More than in urban areas, it is micro and small businesses that drive economic growth and provide employment.

Policies need to deliver business growth in the countryside to diversify the economy and provide much-needed housing for people to live and work in villages. Whilst national housing targets are important to deliver large scale development, often what rural areas need is smaller-scale housing in many villages. In 2021, people on the rural housing waiting list numbered 260,000 yet only 4,500 social houses were built in 2019/20.

The CLA strongly supports the push for development that fits within the scale and character of the existing settlement, but other measures in the Bill would create a backward step in an environment where many limitations and protections already apply. Only 15% of brownfield land is in rural areas with most in the South East, running contrary to the ethos of levelling up. Coupled with increasing protections for agricultural land and a mandatory infrastructure levy, it will become unviable or impossible for villages to expand at all.

Just over 50% of English planning authorities have an up-to-date local plan. The local planning process is tortuous and unlikely to be improved in the short term. That is why the current presumption in favour of sustainable development is critical, and must not be altered until the whole system has been reformed. The CLA welcomed the new decision-making architecture in the Bill, but we are now worried that it will be watered down.



The APPG for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse recommended improved training for planning officers, and the addition of one extra planning officer within each planning department just to meet current demand. Our members' experience is that many planning applications are still not delivered on time, and are subject to time extensions. The new responsibilities placed on local authorities – including nutrient neutrality and biodiversity net gain - will require even greater capacity and expertise. Neither the Bill nor the announced consultations would solve these problems.

The government amendment on compulsory purchase is also a cause for concern. Compulsory purchase should only ever be used as a last resort to acquire land. We are already seeing businesses failing to get timely and fair compensation for their losses, and schemes fail to mitigate against their impact on small businesses.

As a former Secretary of State for DEFRA, you know how much our farmers and land managers care for and maintain our natural environment. Nobody is calling for our countryside to be concreted over but neither should it be preserved in aspic or allowed to stagnate. Treating the countryside as a museum restricts economic diversification and activity, and with it the well-paid jobs which keep communities alive.

I know this is an area you care greatly about and we are keen to discuss solutions with you and your team as part of a wider discussion on how we can unlock the potential of the economy in rural areas. I have also copied this letter to the Secretary of State for the Environment and also the Rural Affairs Minister, as we are deeply concerned about the impacts to rural communities of the proposed revisions to the Bill.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Mark Tufnell'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Mark' being more prominent than the last name 'Tufnell'.

Mark Tufnell
CLA President