



Unlocking the potential of the rural economy

The countryside has vast economic, environmental and social potential. Landowners and land managers are already helping to feed the nation, and fight climate change and nature decline. Now, many are diversifying their businesses, seeking to grow the economy, create skilled new jobs and strengthen their local communities.

They cannot do all of this alone. The rural economy is 19% less productive than the national average. Closing this gap would add £43 billion to the economy. If the rural economy is to succeed then the many barriers to economic growth in the countryside must be removed.

This document is part of a series of 'missions' published by the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), which represents 26,000 landowners and rural businesses in England and Wales. These missions are designed to help policy-makers unlock the potential of the rural economy – for the good of our rural communities and the country as a whole.

Responsible Access for All

Mission Five

There are 140,000 miles of public footpaths in England and Wales alone – enough to walk around the world six times. This is on top of 3.5 million acres of public access land and a large amount of permissive access land. This vast network is available to everyone – but it needs maintaining and promoting, with better information made available to the general public about where to find it, and how to enjoy it responsibly.

Landowners and land managers are determined to provide high-quality access to the general public. They are, however, trying to balance the demand for public access with other competing uses for the same land. With nearly 70 million people to feed, and a myriad of environmental projects necessary to fight climate change and reverse biodiversity loss, this balance can be hard to strike.

The starting point must be government and landowners working together so that the public can respect, protect and enjoy our beautiful countryside.

To deliver responsible access for all, government must:

1. fund permissive access through Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes;
2. revise the level of liability where permissive access is offered under Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes;
3. teach the Countryside Code in the national curriculum;
4. allow for temporary diversions where livestock are present;
5. facilitate real-time route information for the general public; and
6. develop green social prescribing.



To deliver responsible access for all, government must take the following action.

1

Fund permissive access through Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes

Setting up and maintaining new permissive access routes can be very expensive for landowners and land managers. Many will, however, voluntarily provide additional access if those costs can be covered through existing funding mechanisms.

Actions

- Extend payments further to allow the creation of circular access routes and access to water.
- Fund the required infrastructure provision, such as parking, canoe launching sites or toilets.

2

Revise the level of liability where permissive access is offered under Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes

A recurring concern for many landowners is the duty of care owed to someone enjoying permissive access on their land. This concern often prevents additional access from being offered – not least as it can result in large increases to their insurance premiums.

Action

- Amend the Occupiers' Liability Act 1984 to ensure that any increase in access does not impact on the level of liability owed.

3

Teach the Countryside Code in the national curriculum

A poll undertaken by Ordnance Survey in 2022 found that 25% of adults had not been taught how to read a map. Having the confidence to use the rights of way network is a key part of being able to recreationally enjoy the countryside. It is vital that the Countryside Code is taught as part of the national curriculum.

Actions

- Teach the Countryside Code as part of the national curriculum to ensure it is taught universally to all students at Key Stage 2.
- Review the national curriculum for geography to ensure that practical map reading skills are taught beyond Year 7. This topic area should encompass planning and following a route rather than being restricted to the interpretation of mapping data.

4

Allow for temporary diversions where livestock are present

The countryside is a working environment, and it can be a dangerous place – particularly where livestock are present. There must be a balance between protecting the rights of way network with the operational needs of farm businesses. This should include allowing public rights of way to be temporarily diverted.

Action

- Amend the Highways Act 1980 to enable farmers to temporarily divert public rights of way where livestock are present, removing the risk to people using the public rights of way network, and protecting livestock from dog attacks.

5

Facilitate real-time route information for the general public

A common criticism of the permissive access options under the old Countryside Stewardship schemes is that it was difficult for users to know where routes were located. Land managers say that users are not aware of closures and restrictions on access land and complain that some apps contain inaccurate data leading to trespass incidents, damage to crops and habitats, and a risk to livestock and visitor health and safety. A mapping app could solve these problems by bringing all the data needed together in one place, and it can be viewable on the day of a user's visit.

Government mapping data has already been used to create the Ordnance Survey app. Many other digital apps have a 'lite' version with less functionality or are supported by advertising, and this is one option to consider.

Action

- Fund a dynamic mapping app using data developed for the Ordnance Survey app, allowing for real-time information on closures or diversions necessitated by maintenance, flooding or farm operations.



Develop green social prescribing

Academic research consistently shows the benefits of green social prescribing. This is the practice of supporting people to engage in nature-based interventions and activities to improve their mental and physical health.

Currently, 38% of people do not have green or blue space within 15 minutes' walk of their home. The mental health benefits associated with visits to woodlands in the UK are estimated to be £185 million each year, with visits to English woodlands contributing £141 million of savings to the NHS annually.

Action

- Develop a capital grants scheme to finance the infrastructure and equipment needed to get schemes off the ground, such as provision of disabled access, parking and toilets, and funding for activities that link workers can refer their patients.

The CLA

The CLA is here to help. We represent our members in a collaborative way, working with policy-makers from across government and across all political traditions. To discuss this document further, or to explore how you can help us in our mission to unlock the potential of the rural economy, please contact the CLA External Affairs team via email: externalaffairs@cla.org.uk.

The CLA exists to champion, protect and enhance the rural economy, environment and way of life.

We aspire to unlock the potential of the rural economy by promoting innovative ideas to a national audience and providing practical support to members. We do this so our members can feed the nation, create jobs and prosperity, invest in communities and protect the environment for future generations.