



## 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.

# A Fully Connected Countryside

## Mission Six

Many people imagine a rural idyll – one of remoteness, of peace and quiet. For those living in rural areas however, there is often a sense of disconnect, of being forgotten or even ignored by policy-makers.

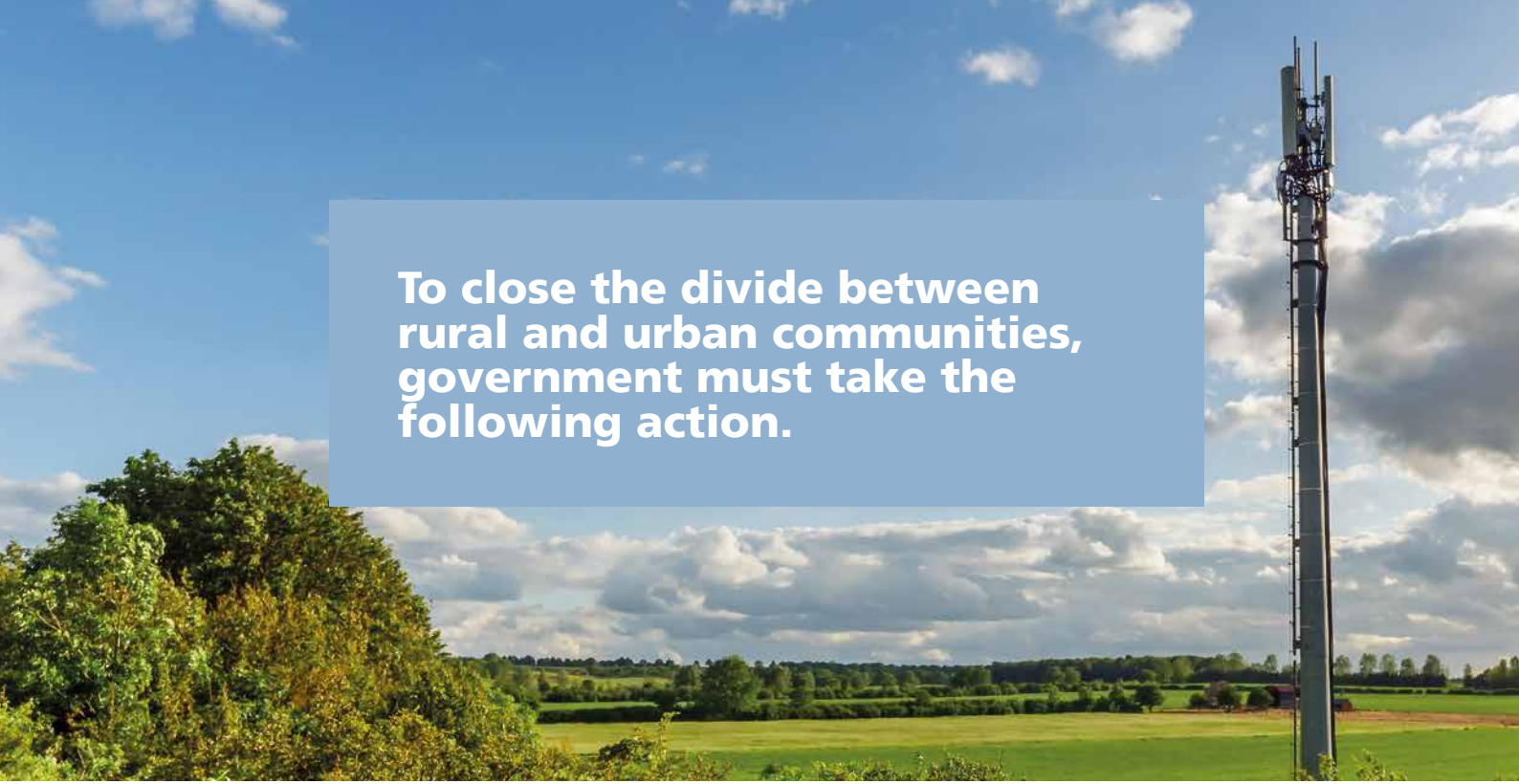
Whether it is the closure of bus routes, the limited electricity infrastructure, or painfully slow broadband speeds, it appears as though rural areas are always the last to receive investment.

The digital divide in particular is most keenly felt in rural areas, with only 45% of rural areas having access to gigabit-capable broadband compared to 83% of urban areas. There are similar issues with mobile connectivity, with 73% of rural areas covered by the four networks for 4G, unlike the 99% availability found in cities and towns. Digital connectivity is not just important to rural communities for work but also for social interaction and the provision of services such as healthcare.

Without being connected to the world around them, employees find it more difficult to get to work, entrepreneurs find it harder to grow their business, and those striving to decarbonise their homes and cars find it almost impossible to connect to greener energy networks. On this basis, a fully connected countryside will create a fairer, greener, more prosperous countryside.

### **To close the divide between rural and urban communities, government must:**

1. make green energy accessible for all;
2. extend broadband and mobile connectivity across all areas;
3. support rural communities impacted by national infrastructure projects; and
4. connect communities with adequate public transport.



**To close the divide between rural and urban communities, government must take the following action.**

1

### **Make green energy accessible for all**

Further expansion of renewable generation and storage is needed to meet net zero. Rural areas have an important role to play in decarbonising our energy system, but they face significant challenges in doing so. Along with the difficulties of getting planning consent, applicants often receive prohibitively expensive grid connection quotes that prevent projects from going ahead, further harming the transition toward net zero.

Rural grids are weak, with very little capacity and will not match the likely future demands to be placed on them. This often means disproportionately costly electricity upgrades for rural businesses looking to install new equipment (e.g. food processing facilities, robotics), electric vehicle charge points or heat pumps. Network operators should be required to plan for the future need for the electrification of vehicles and heating.

Government must prioritise electricity grid connectivity in rural areas, making connections more affordable.

#### **Actions**

- Require the National Grid Electricity System Operator to use its power to introduce strict milestones in connection agreements and terminate stalled connection projects that are delaying everyone else.
- Ensure network operators use effective grid controls (such as monitoring usage), when looking at expanding the network.
- Place a statutory requirement on network operators to include rural needs and proportionate investment in rural grid infrastructure when planning future projects.
- Guarantee sufficient supply of electric vehicle charge points to meet future demand, and ensure adequate investment in the network capacity to reduce the divide between rural and urban areas.

- Install public charging infrastructure beyond motorways and major roads.
- Extend the Electric Vehicle (EV) Home Charge and Workplace Charging Schemes to cover the required power connections and upgrades, which are often the most expensive part of the process.

## 2

### **Extend broadband and mobile connectivity across all areas**

Rural connectivity has improved dramatically in recent years yet still lags behind urban areas. Ofcom's 2022 Connected Nations report outlined that only 83% of rural areas in the UK have access to superfast broadband compared to 98% of urban areas, and 403,000 properties do not have access to decent broadband.

Rural businesses and communities need assurances from government regarding how coverage will be improved, and when and where. People who live in rural areas rely on good connectivity for social interactions and information. They also need it to access training, public services and seek medical help. It is essential for rural businesses, that need it to operate online booking platforms, sell their products and buy supplies, access remote training for their employees, use remote sensors to monitor crops or habitats, and interact with government.

#### **Action**

- Produce with the telecommunications sector an accessible delivery roadmap for areas yet to be connected, with tangible improvement to coverage to ensure a fully connected countryside.

## 3

### **Support rural communities impacted by national infrastructure projects**

Connectivity, be it physical or digital, often requires new or upgraded infrastructure. Whilst it is often the case that rural communities benefit from such upgrades, in some cases, rural areas will host infrastructure that it will not directly benefit from – such as railways, roads, power plants and electricity distribution pylons and cables.

To ensure the necessary infrastructure is delivered quickly, efficiently, and in a way that does not damage the communities that it intersects, we are calling for fairer processes and faster remedies to any issues that arise.

#### **Actions**

- Ensure that payments for property acquired through compulsory purchase are made promptly, to display that lessons have been learnt from previous projects such as HS2.
- Establish a duty of care in legislation to avoid poor practice, such as inadequate communications and consultation, by contractors on national infrastructure projects.
- Make greater use of negotiated commercial agreements rather than compulsory purchase orders by default.



# 4

## Connect communities with adequate public transport

Many urban transport solutions are impractical in the countryside, with innovative solutions required, such as rural minibus schemes. The government introduced a pilot Rural Mobility Fund, which allows local authorities to bid for funding for on-demand bus services. Though the scheme is welcome, rural residents should not have to be at the whim of a lottery grant to decide whether or not they can access transport.

### Action

- Extend the Rural Mobility Fund to all rural local authorities without a bidding process, to ensure equality of access.

## 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](mailto: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.