



29 November 2018

Enterprising Countryside Charter

Rural businesses are entrepreneurial, creative and preparing to make the most of the opportunities Brexit presents. They generate nearly £300bn gross value added (GVA) to the UK economy every year and are crucial for local communities, creating new rural jobs, food production and the environment. Government must not overlook the potential of the rural area as plans are drawn up for post-Brexit Britain.

Committing to the policies in this Enterprising Countryside Charter will create a more positive environment for rural business growth, giving rural businesses confidence in making the new investments needed for a strong rural economy as we adapt to life outside the EU and well beyond.

1. Rural Roaming mobile networks

An efficient digital infrastructure can lead to increased productivity for business and more inclusiveness for communities. But the rural-urban digital divide is widening, rural areas continue to be side-lined in the rush to roll out 4G in the areas where there is greatest return for the operators. To achieve the Government's ambitions of 4G for 95% of the country by 2022, clear conditions for mobile operators to meet must be put in place alongside enabling rural roaming so that users can access available networks in the countryside which has, according to Ofcom, the potential to deliver this target in a matter of months.

2. New Rural Enterprise Frameworks

Brexit offers us the opportunity to move to funding models that focus more on the needs of British businesses and rural areas. Rural socio-economic schemes should become a fundamental part of the Shared Prosperity Fund, guided by a national strategy, but delivered locally. Each Local Enterprise Partnership should produce a Rural Economic Framework which reflects the rural economy of their area, the types of businesses within the locality and the desire for funding that will move those businesses forward and encourage new businesses to establish. The framework must also take a lead role in shaping the planning policies of an area.

3. A new Rural Enterprise Plan

A Rural Enterprise Plan (REP) produced by the landowner, in a prescribed form, should set out a strategic vision for the future of the business and how land and buildings can be put to best use over time by identifying viable opportunities whether these be tourism, business, leisure, residential or environmental proposals. The REP should be prepared in consultation with all relevant stakeholders including other businesses, local people, neighbours, the parish council, planning and highways authorities, and Local Enterprise Partnerships. Planning policy should require planning authorities to have regard to the REP as a material consideration when determining planning applications.

4. Sustainable village criteria

The CLA has analysed the services assessed by 50 rural local authorities when compiling settlement hierarchies. The most common services considered key to sustainability include Post Offices, schools, GP surgeries, meeting rooms, pubs, bus routes and libraries. Only 18% of authorities identified broadband as an indicator of sustainability, whilst 92% thought a bus route was. Current criteria used to conduct sustainability assessments are not fit for the modern, digital age and means over 2000 villages in England are being overlooked for affordable housing. Local authorities should take greater account of access to services such as broadband and social capital.

5. Cross-department Rural Business Minister

This period of preparation for Brexit is the right time for Government to extend the remit and resources of the Minister with responsibility for rural business. Acting as Rural Ambassador is currently part of the role of the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, this should become a cross-departmental Defra and BEIS position. Within Defra, the role has been crucial in improving rural awareness across government departments. But as the economic balance of rural areas changes, and as the Government's Industrial Strategy is developed, the role should expand across Defra and BEIS to ensure synergies and focus within both departments, translating to real improvement for the countryside in practice.