NICRE
National Innovation Centre
Rural Enterprise

NICRE Submission to the Rural Taskforce on Government Mission Delivery: *Breaking Down Barriers to Opportunity*

Over summer 2025, NICRE were invited to contribute to a national Taskforce led by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) considering Government Mission Delivery in a rural context.

The aim was to provide focus on the needs of rural areas in the development of policy under the five missions outlined in the UK Government Plan for Change (growth, clean energy, opportunity, crime and health). As part of our contribution, NICRE worked with partners to provide written evidence to the Taskforce relating to each mission.

This is our submission on the Breaking Down Barriers to Opportunity mission.

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What are the current challenges that rural communities and businesses face in relation to this mission?

NICRE's submissions to the growth and clean energy missions demonstrate that **rural areas create many opportunities for enterprise and prosperity and are part of the solution to breaking down barriers for businesses and communities, in rural areas and more widely**. Many rural businesses and communities create very good jobs, opportunities for gaining work experience and upskilling, and contribute to the nation's wellbeing. However, there are also longstanding challenges to be addressed.

Rural economies can also create great opportunities for young people. However, with a spatially more dispersed array of businesses and settlements, those growing up in rural areas encounter challenges which influence social mobility with respect to their education and career choices, and they often have to leave home to seek opportunities elsewhere[1]. The **interplay between wage levels**

[1] Jentsch, B. and M. Shucksmith, Eds. (2004) Young people in rural areas of Europe. Aldershot, Ashgate.

and the accessibility and affordability of transport and housing are distinctive aspects shaping their participation in the labour market, employment paths and opportunities, mediated also by **education, social class, gender and social networks**[2].

Digital exclusion has emerged as an important issue, reflecting not just the patchy provision of high-speed broadband and mobile coverage but also its high cost for low-income families[3] and lack of access to appropriate devices. While there are benefits particularly to the digitalisation of services, it is important to consider who is excluded by these changes, particularly when access to broadband is not universal and digital literacy training and support uneven[4].

Lack of transport, employment and affordable housing can severely limit education and career opportunities[5]. Lack of affordable housing in either buying or rental markets means that, should they wish, many young people are unable to afford to live in the communities in which they grew up[6],[7]. In some rural areas, low-wage, low-skill opportunities can also act as a barrier for young people trying to gain a foothold in the labour market, making it difficult for them to progress to better paying work.

Poor transport[8] options and digital connectivity mean it can be difficult to access education and training, apprenticeships and better paying employment[9]. NICRE research in County Durham highlighted how poor access to public transport is limiting future career decisions for young people living in rural areas, who are forced to choose post-16 courses based on transport availability rather than their goals and interests[10]. Department for Education statistics show that urban local authorities in England had higher rates of level 3 pupils progressing to HE or training from all backgrounds than those in rural areas in 2022/23. In England, state school pupils from FSM backgrounds who live in rural villages have on average the lowest chance of going on to higher education[11].

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[2] Shucksmith, M. (2004) Young people and social exclusion in rural areas, Sociologia Ruralis 44, 1, 43-59.
[3] Black, N., Scott, K., and Shucksmith, M. (2019) Social Inequalities in Rural England: Impacts on Young People Post-2008, Journal of Rural Studies, 68, 264-275.
[4] https://nicre.co.uk/projects/partnership-projects/rural-digital-inclusion-project/
[5] Nguyen, T., Phillipson, J., Thompson-Glen, M., Magistrali, A., Ward, J., Fitzsimmons, C., Goulton, R., Moss, M., and Gorton, M. (2024) Evidence Review: NECA Environmental Stewardship. Coast and Rural Growth Investment Plan. NICRE, June. nicre-evidence-review-north-east-combined-authority-environment-stewardship-coast-and-rural-growth-investment-plan-june-2024.pdf
[6] McAreavey, R. and Kemmett, D. (2022) Rural housing: challenges, opportunities and solutions. NICRE Research Report No 9. nicre-research-report-no-9-july-2022-rural-housing-challenges-opportunities-and-solutions.pdf
[7] Community-led housing and town centre regeneration - NICRE
[8] Getting on board - why public transport matters for rural people and places - NICRE
[9] Foster, C. and Kirk, S. (2024) Exploring identity, place and worker attraction and retention in rural businesses. NICRE Research Report No 21. nicre-research-report-no-21-july-2024-exploring-identity-place-and-worker-attraction-and-retention-in-rural-businesses.pdf.
[10] Tocco, B., Thompson-Glen, M., Nguyen, T., Magistrali, A., Martin, J., Phillipson, J., Anderson, H., Henderson, J., Gorton, M. and Curry, J. (2023), Understanding Rural Durham - Supporting Durham County Council's evidence base. NICRE Research Report No 15. nicre-research-report-no-15-april-2023-understanding-rural-durham-supporting-durham-county-council-s-evidence-base.pdf
[11] Atherton, G. and Sit, F. (2025) Access to higher education cold spots in England. Ruskin Institute for Social Equity (RISE) report. New RISE report shows coastal and rural young people missing out on university | University of West London

Insights from a NICRE Northumberland Youth meeting highlighted concern that **traditional areas of support for young people are disappearing, especially in more remote rural areas, and voluntary services are facing funding problems**. This has resulted in reduced support (e.g., careers advice and youth club provision) and activities for young people across the county. Those services that do remain may be inaccessible for the young people who need them. Transport problems can also limit the types of opportunities that providers are able to offer to all children and young people, and for younger children to be supported to build independence by experiencing public transport[12].

Many young people in rural areas have been unevenly affected both directly and indirectly by the economic crisis and austerity[13]. Direct effects can include: fewer secure, full-time jobs available locally and instead more **'precarious' work opportunities**; **closure of local services** such as the job centre, Connexions career support, libraries and leisure facilities, youth clubs, SureStart, nursery provision and support for young carers; **diminished public transport** provision; **withdrawal of educational maintenance** allowances; and more limited **prospects of home ownership**.

In addition to these direct impacts are some less visible, indirect impacts whereby **families can become less able to offer support to their young people** due to increasing costs of living, and this is especially important in rural areas where patchy access to public services is a key challenge. Indeed, the overwhelming reliance of young people in rural areas on family for support can generate further inequalities through what Black et al. (2019) term 'secondary impact austerity'. Austerity measures, stigmatisation around receipt of benefits and an increasing dependency on family support are leading to greater inequality in life chances in relation to employment and training, transport, digital connectivity, housing and social networks.

These challenges extend, of course, beyond children and young people: the **barriers to opportunity need to be addressed at every stage through life and for different social groups[14]**. Research highlights several barriers[15],[16],[17]. These can include low wage, precarious work, a higher cost of essentials, high costs of childcare disproportionately affecting women's participation in the workforce, unaffordable housing, private renting and a lack of social housing, lack of access to public transport, the centralisation and digitalisation of services (including job centres, health, welfare and advice services), an inability of the welfare system to effectively reach into rural areas, and reliance on voluntary, community and family help to fill the gaps. It is important to note that not everyone has this safety net – the 40% growth in rural homelessness over the past five years is just one

[12] Tocco, B., Thompson-Glen, M., Nguyen, T., Magistrali, A., Martin, J., Phillipson, J., Anderson, H., Henderson, J., Gorton, M. and Curry, J. (2023), Understanding Rural Durham - Supporting Durham County Council's evidence base. NICRE Research Report No 15. nicre-research-report-no-15-april-2023-understanding-rural-durham-supporting-durham-county-council-s-evidence-base.pdf

[13] Black, N., Scott, K., and Shucksmith, M. (2019) Social Inequalities in rural England: Impacts on young people post-2008, Journal of Rural Studies, 68, 264-275.

[14] This includes different categories of international migrants. See McAreavey, R (2024) Migrant workers in rural economies: exploring boundaries and belonging. Class and Status. Journal of Critical Approaches to Class and Status, 2(2) pp. 35-60. Also: Barberis E, Caponio, T and McAreavey, R (in production) (eds) Handbook of international migration in small towns and rural areas. Edward Elgar.

[15] Shucksmith, M., Glass, J., Chapman, P. and Atterton, J. (2023) Rural Poverty Today: Experiences of Social Exclusion in Rural Britain, Bristol: Policy Press.

[16] McAreavey, R. et al. (2023) Rural England: Local Perspectives on Community and Economy'. Research funded by Defra.

[17] McAreavey, R. (2022) Finding rural community resilience: Understanding the role of anchor institutions. Journal of Rural Studies, Vol. 96, pp.227-236.

example of the impact of this[18]. Moreover, the voluntary and community sectors' capacity to provide support is also reduced as a result of the economic crisis and austerity[19]. Some individuals including refugees or those working in the low wage agri-food sector, face further problems including lack of proficiency in English language; limited support and family networks; and insufficient awareness of the labour market.

Businesses in rural areas in turn report challenges around recruiting and retaining staff due to lack of public transport and affordable housing[20],[21],[22] which impacts on their ability to contribute fully to the growth mission whilst at the same time providing opportunities for good work and career progression.

Patchy access to services continues to be a critical issue in many rural areas – for all ages. This relates to services from all sectors – public, private and voluntary. As costs increase and funding decreases, NICRE's community partners report that "the inexorable drive for efficiency and centralisation inevitably erodes rural service provision year-on-year". Difficulties around accessing services connect into a **combination of interwoven challenges** which can be experienced within rural places, as the following key areas listed within the Operational Plan of Community Action Northumberland show[23]:

- Hidden and dispersed poverty
- Lack of affordable housing
- Low pay and poverty in work
- Lack of transport, childcare, and other services
- Digital access, broadband and mobile signal infrastructure
- Fragile, and sometimes non-existent, energy infrastructure
- Out-migration of young people
- Increased cost of service delivery
- Difficulty in accessing centralised services
- The impacts of an ageing population
- Lower take-up of benefits
- Detachment from labour markets
- Isolation and loneliness for people in various groups and at various ages
- Fuel poverty
- Low availability of many household service providers
- Lack of a 'voice' for young people
- Attitudes and perceptions preventing recognition of others' disadvantage
- Health and wellbeing

Rural **disadvantage is notoriously less visible within official data**, with rural areas experiencing hidden poverty and vulnerability. Welfare reforms, reductions in the provision of services and shifts towards less secure forms of employment have in particular exacerbated the **challenges for vulnerable groups**, including lone parents, people with mental or physical illness, as well as children

[18] Rough sleeping in countryside higher than some urban areas, analysis shows - CPRE
[19] https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/road-ahead-2024/economic-drivers
[20] Tocco, B., Nguyen, T., Phillipson, J. Gorton, M., Dwyer, J., Hotopp, U. and Bradley, P. (2024) Labour and skills availability: impacts on rural enterprise, National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise, State of Rural Enterprise Report No 7. nicre-state-of-rural-enterprise-report-no-7-february-2024-labour-and-skills-availability-impacts-on-rural-enterprise.pdf
[21] Partridge, N., Nguyen, T., and Thompson-Glen, M. (2025) Rural business perspectives on Northumberland's housing needs. NICRE Research Report No 27. northumberland-employers-rural-housing-needs-report-1.pdf
[22] Foster, C. and Kirk, S. (2024) Exploring identity, place and worker attraction and retention in rural businesses. NICRE Research Report No 21. nicre-research-report-no-21-july-2024-exploring-identity-place-and-worker-attraction-and-retention-in-rural-businesses.pdf.
[23] Community Action Northumberland Business Plan, March 2016.

and young people. For example, in the North East, despite high concentrations of child poverty being in urban areas, multiple constituencies in rural areas have more than a third of their **children living in poverty**[24]. The Minister of State for Local Government and Devolution has acknowledged the need for deprivation assessments to capture hidden challenges in less densely populated areas[25]. Increasingly deprivation measures are used to determine allocation of public and voluntary sector funding, potentially further exacerbating lack of support in rural areas.

What can rural communities and businesses offer to support the delivery of this mission?

Rural communities and for profit and not-for-profit businesses already play a key role in breaking down barriers to opportunity. Social enterprises and anchor institutions[26] specifically contribute to growth and sustainable prosperity by reinvesting any profit/surplus they generate into the communities they serve, promoting 'decent work' and volunteering opportunities, while also retaining income and spending within the local economy[27].

Rural community and voluntary organisations provide essential support in tackling an array of the underlying barriers to opportunity, around employability, affordable housing, poverty, isolation, rural services etc. These organisations have **trusted relationships and unique insight into their local community**: and can help public authorities to better understand needs, target funding, extend reach and improve outcomes. Often substituting for roles which the state performs in urban areas, this capacity varies substantially from place to place, and VCSEs themselves face financial pressures and challenges in recruiting staff and enlisting and supporting volunteers. These highly valued organisations are seen by many as a 'first port of call', but are often over-stretched, facing funding pressures while struggling to cover large rural areas. They continually are forced to innovate in service delivery so that they offer more with less resources. They face soaring energy costs, additional NI costs and increasing demand while still playing a vital role, supporting households, particularly as public services have been centralised[28].

The Employment Hubs[29] and Warm Hubs[30] models developed by Community Action Northumberland (CAN) are examples of how **rural communities can help, especially if working in partnership with the public sector and public policy**. Employment support services find it challenging to reach into deep rural areas. As part of the Solid Foundations project in Northumberland for over 6 years (under its current and previous names) CAN's role has been to bring these services to rural communities through operation of Rural Employment Hubs and

[24] Nguyen, T., Phillipson, J., Thompson-Glen, M., Magistrali, A., Ward, J., Fitzsimmons, C., Goulton, R., Moss, M., and Gorton, M. (2024) Evidence Review: NECA Environmental Stewardship. Coast and Rural Growth Investment Plan. NICRE, June. nicre-evidence-review-north-east-combined-authority-environment-stewardship-coast-and-rural-growth-investment-plan-june-2024.pdf

[25] Funding Reform Must Deliver for Rural Communities - Rural Services Network

[26] McAreavey, R. (2022) Finding rural community resilience: Understanding the role of anchor institutions. Journal of Rural Studies, Vol. 96, pp.227-236.

[27] Vickers, I., Owen, R., Lyon, F., Wang, S. and Rabbevåg, S. (2022) Rural social enterprise: contributions, challenges and support needs. NICRE Research Report No 12. nicre-research-report-no-12-november-2022-rural-social-enterprise-contributions-challenges-and-support-needs.pdf.

[28] Shucksmith, M., Glass, J., Chapman, P. and Atterton, J. (2023) Rural Poverty Today: Experiences of Social Exclusion in Rural Britain, Bristol: Policy Press

[29] Northumberland Rural Employment Hubs | Supporting Individuals | Community Action Northumberland

[30] Warm Hubs | Supporting Individuals | Community Action Northumberland

outreach from these. Hubs have become a key focus for rural employment support and can be utilized by other support services and initiatives as they come and go. A key challenge going forward is to maintain these hubs so that rural residents out of work and economically inactive know where they can go for support. Warm Hubs were set up in 2015 directly to tackle rural isolation and fuel poverty. Local initiatives like Warm Hubs can be effective not only in providing a warm space for people but also as an access point for the range of organisations offering advice on benefit entitlements and support for home insulation and energy efficiency.

There are many other examples across the ACRE network of support specifically for children and young people in rural England in the form of mother and toddler groups, nurseries, Sure Start centres, pre-school and after-school clubs, holiday clubs, Scout Association and Girlguiding groups and many more.

Village halls and community buildings are a cornerstone of civil society and VCSE provision in rural England. These are often key places where social interaction can take place and where services can be delivered, including banking support and food provision. It is important that they are supported to operate effectively and maintain/improve the facilities to meet increasingly diverse needs for all age groups. They are essential in helping to overcome social isolation that is experienced by certain groups, such as older people, new parents, and people with disabilities. Continuing support for community spaces, particularly relating to their long-term viability and sustainability, is essential, as is DEFRA's continuing support of the rural community councils in the ACRE network. This institutional capacity building is a pre-cursor to rural communities' capacity to act.

How can government ensure that the missions work for and reflect the needs and opportunities inherent to rural communities and businesses?

To break down barriers to opportunity, **a rural lens is required across all government missions**. For example, fully embedding the concerns and opportunities of rural businesses within the growth mission will be important to developing more secure, good quality jobs and improved incomes in rural areas, as well as strengthened training, career aspirations and progression. This will create opportunities to focus rural economic development on good job creation — combining business support with skills upgrading to drive improvements in job quality. The rural lens should recognise the interconnections and flows between rural and urban areas, **helping to overcome a binary approach to policy**. Equally recognising the **importance of natural assets within the rural context is vital for wider society**. The natural environment has been shown to deliver important wellbeing benefits that are preventative and can generate financial benefits for wider government including the NHS[31].

Moreover, **rural communities and businesses should be meaningfully included in the design of policies and funding schemes** linked to the missions, to avoid misalignment between national goals and local needs. They bring deep, practical knowledge of place-based challenges and solutions which is critical for designing sustainable, resilient development pathways[32]. This approach is required to ensure rural communities are not just passive recipients but **active leaders in the co-design and delivery of missions while also driving sustainable, inclusive growth**. Funding approaches should be

[31] McAreavey, R., Best, S., Newberry, D, Seery, F. and Thompson-Glen, M. (2025) Nature for People and Place in the Wansbeck Catchment. Research and community engagement report. NICRE report for Natural England and the Environment Agency.

[32] Lowe, P., Phillipson, J., Proctor, A. and Gkartzios, M. (2019) Expertise in rural development: a conceptual and empirical analysis. World Development, 116, 28-37.

agile and able to respond to a range of different needs within rural communities, offering opportunities for multiple entry points so that very grassroot groups can access resources, as well as more established third sector organisations.

Policy and practice can be effective in addressing rural poverty and tackling barriers to opportunity. This is best addressed through **a combination of people-centred and place-based measures**. Past people-centred social policy reforms such as tax and pension credits, proved effective in reducing poverty in rural and urban areas alike[33], including child poverty. Their impact in rural areas was diminished by lower claimant rates, however, and such measures could be even more effective if complemented by local place-based action to promote awareness and take-up of benefit entitlements[34]. Policies to recognise overseas qualifications can **unlock talent pools that exist within the international migrant community**.

More **sustained support is required for trusted local voluntary and community organisations** to continue to reach into rural areas. Small investments in small places can make a huge impact. However, due to their scale and dispersed geography, together with the relative costs of delivery per output, it can be difficult for broader government initiatives, investments and support to reach smaller rural communities and businesses in a sensitive and efficient way, which means they can often miss out. Voluntary and community organisations play a vital role in maintaining essential social infrastructure, facilitating and targeting support and investments for rural households and communities, and providing support at a local level whilst directly linking into local authority and government programmes.

Community organisations are dependent on external funding to enable their services to continue. This comes and goes and often leaves time gaps in support which can result in the loss of personnel and of community capacity. As well as **growing longer-term revenue/programme funding for these services**, and reducing dependency of services on short term funds, **core funds are needed to underpin the support community organisations** provide on a substantive and sustainable level. **Innovation within funding regimes** can also stimulate creative solutions that are rooted within the community and enable a community asset approach. As a result, they are much more sustainable.

More broadly, the following recommendations are relevant to this mission:

- The **welfare system should be adapted** to ensure that rural citizens are not disadvantaged in terms of their access to support.
- With the cost-of-living crisis hitting people in rural areas especially hard due to double energy vulnerability and the higher cost of essentials, **measures to address fuel poverty and to promote benefit take-up** in rural areas are vital.
- Centralisation and digitalisation of services and support affect rural citizens unevenly, with damaging impacts on the wellbeing of the most vulnerable, meaning that **innovation in service delivery must be combined with attending to diversity of access**.
- With the drive for more and better jobs across rural places, **post 16 education and vocational training offers need to be addressed** so young people and those looking to retrain in rural areas have parity of choice and access to training as those in urban areas.

[33] Vera-Toscano, E., Shucksmith, M., and Brown, D. (2020) Poverty Dynamics in Rural Britain 1991-2008: Did Labour's social policy reforms make a difference? Journal of Rural Studies, 75, 216-228.
[34] Shucksmith, M., Glass, J., Chapman, P. and Atterton, J. (2023) Rural Poverty Today: Experiences of Social Exclusion in Rural Britain, Bristol: Policy Press.

- A lack of affordable housing opportunities in rural areas should be addressed through **greater investment in social housing in villages and small towns, dedicated feasibility funding for rural affordable and community-led housing**, as well as addressing associated planning issues. A more innovative view and solutions around bringing currently empty premises in rural places back into rentable homes are needed: be it space above high streets or housing on estates that is currently sitting below the allowable EPC ratings.
- Measures should aim to **build local capacity** to develop, apply for and manage investments and to enable them to participate fully and fairly in new opportunities, including through support of **community-led local development**. This would build those assets that already exist within rural communities and help address the gaps in resources and capability currently experienced.

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