

THE CO-OPERATIVE PARTY RURAL COMMISSION REPORT



**co-operative
party**

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FOREWORD

Roughly 19 million people live in England's rural communities, some 17% of the population. Since the 1990s, Government has taken the view that urban and rural areas are sufficiently different to merit different treatment in terms of public policy. The Co-operative Party invited a small group of members to form a rural commission to explore the challenges which rural and sometimes remote communities that disparately fall under that heading now face.

What we have found is a growing disconnect between urban and rural areas, with a sense of rural communities coming off second best in many areas of national decision making and resource allocation.

The last 13 years of austerity-driven cuts to public expenditure have exacerbated this feeling to the point that many rural, small town and village dwellers feel left behind and left out of national life and the consideration of their needs.

We asked ourselves what drives this sense, this feeling?

Primarily it is the pace of change to small town and village life. The decline in the provision of services, whether they be public or private, is prominent among concerns. Twenty years back most small towns and villages would have had a choice of pubs, a post office, a police station, access to a doctor's surgery, a primary school, a bank and a range of shops. Most would have been on a bus route with a reasonably regular connection to larger centres of population providing a wider access to services and facilities. With that regular connection of course comes opportunity and aspiration.

In many parts of modern Britain and especially parts of England those assumptions no longer hold.

We also asked when did this sense of decline begin and what has driven it? Of more relevance to the labour movement as our attention turns to the hope of a general election, is what can we do as policy makers to put decline into reverse and take advantage of the opportunities that the digital world offers.

Much has changed with the emergence of a new digital economy. Services and goods can be brought

to consumers as never before, taking out the need for retail outlets and creating a model of modern capitalism less dependent on shops and the high street. Doctors' consultations can be organised online and diagnosis does not rely on a physical presence, the emergence of online banking takes away the necessity for a range of banking services to be provided at a local branch. We have through Zoom acquired skills that mean that more of our learning and teaching can be done online.

So not all is bleak for rural communities. Some of the changes involving digital access contain opportunities, often invisible ones. But the Covid 19 experience is rightly seen as a period where people, especially those living in more remote areas, experienced extreme isolation. All this at the same time the emergence of Zoom and Teams also brought a different but often welcome form of connectivity.

In work and business terms these digital linkages have expanded many people's horizons and options for personal development, work and study opportunities. In building back better from the aftershock of Covid, the challenges following Brexit and the recent financial crisis authored by 'Trussonomics', we need to harness the positive aspects of this accelerated technological change and find new options for social interaction that ensure individual and community resilience.

As rural commissioners, we have looked at recent history and experience and want to explore the positive contribution that a life in the countryside can bring. There is a conundrum not dissimilar to that which faces coastal communities – these are both highly desirable places to live in and enjoy. But the obstacles to getting the best from living in a small town or village can for many be insurmountable. But it can be done.

The challenge for Labour as a national party that aspires to bring a sense of belonging and unity in a divided age is to design a policy offer with broad appeal. It must however be one that recognises the unique beauty of our countryside and makes a place where people can afford to live their best life, find rewarding work, study, enjoy nature and the culture that comes with it, and access the excitements too that city life can offer.

The themes running through our report are part of finding solutions to the conundrum. We have chosen to focus on a number of themes:

- Improved governance for rural communities and strengthening democracy;
- Social inclusion, tackling rural inequalities and social isolation;
- Creating new skills for the changing nature of the rural economy;
- The reconnecting of rural communities to urban centres;
- The promotion of sustainable local economies through agriculture, tourism and remote working;
- Ensuring the rural economy plays its part in achieving net zero goals.

We hope we have captured the spirit of optimism that has informed our thinking and led to the production of a menu of ideas that taken together provide for a revitalised and reskilled rural economy, bring fairness and equity into policy making and strengthen rural voices and advocacy. We cannot continue as we are with the countryside becoming a haven for affluent middle class interests at the expense of all others, with communities feeling left out, disconnected and lacking the investment necessary to transform them into places where people want to live, grow and bring up families and make a life

Lord Steve Bassam of Brighton

Chair of the Co-operative Party Rural Commission.

THE COMMISSION

The Co-operative Party Rural Commission was established in 2021 to bring together the best ideas for how the co-operative movement can contribute to our rural life. The Commission ran a call for evidence, and carried out its own research into the whole range of issues faced by diverse rural communities.

We would like to thank the Commissioners for their time and energy into producing this substantial report which will help inform and develop future policy under a Labour & Co-operative government.

Members of the Commission included:



**Lord Steve Bassam
(Chair)**



David Drew



**Baroness
Sue Hayman**



Joe Joseph



Liz Pole



Cllr Brenda Weston



**Baroness
Barbara Young**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our rural economies have been left struggling after the impact of COVID-19 coming on top of years of cutbacks, our high-quality food producers being undercut in trade deals, and uncertainty over the Government's new environmental support schemes.

Given the diversity of rural communities the recommendations within this report are numerous but that only goes to highlight the scale of the challenge which they are facing, and the complete rethink needed in rural policy to bring a co-operative approach to the problems they face.

Our vision is simple, our rural communities should be places where people can afford to live their best life, find rewarding work, study, enjoy nature and the culture that comes with it. Our recommendations broadly follow three themes:

Giving a voice to rural communities

It is vital that rural communities are heard within the machinery of government and that any government action responds to the challenges faced by millions of people living in rural communities. We believe that there is a strong case for an incoming Labour Government to establish a Standing Commission to monitor departments 'rural proofing' policies cross government, so that they are no longer forgotten.

But rural communities also need to be empowered themselves, so we recommend strengthening community power, greater investment in parish and town councils and the establishment of county mayors to replicate the devolution seen in metropolitan areas.

Specifically the Community Right to Buy could usefully provide an opportunity to ensure that assets are not lost forever in rural communities. The definition needs to go wider than it currently does to include vital services such as allotments, schools, buses, pubs and local shops, and combined with an improved Community Ownership Fund would ensure the right has economic clout.

Strengthening the rural economy and access to services

Co-operative principles should be at the heart of a

diverse rural economy. A commitment to the growth of co-operatives would ensure that businesses are created or grown that are rooted in the local community. A commitment to a network of regional agencies would ensure co-operative development in every community reflecting their unique economic make-up.

Coupled with fiscal devolution, supportive procurement, investment in skills and apprenticeships we know there is a huge potential for our rural communities to contribute to our country's economic renaissance under a Labour government.

Good services are needed support the local economy and communities, but we know access to services for people who live in rural areas is often poor compared to their urban neighbours – to health and welfare services, education and employment, reducing their income and life chance. The report makes numerous recommendations across various sectors such as transport, agriculture, housing and social care, to transition to a more sustainable and co-operative approach.

Protecting the countryside for the future

There needs to be a balance so that key rural industries like tourism, farming and fishing are more sustainable in environmental and economic terms.

Everyone should have access to our natural environment but it is important that our countryside especially national parks are protected.

Worker and social co-operatives could be promoted in the tourism industry to ensure the stronger involvement of local communities, environmental sustainability, and accessibility for everyone (regardless of age, health and economic profile).

We know that urgent action is needed to reform support for farming and ensure the transition to our future agriculture is fair to farmers, better for wildlife and affordable for us all.

INTRODUCTION

In developing this rural commission document, the Commission agreed to look right across government – from governance and the economy, food and farming, housing, health, jobs, transport and crime – all set against the background of the huge challenges of climate change and the cost-of-living crisis and exacerbated by the government's approach to Brexit and the recent pandemic.

The Labour Party has announced five missions for a better Britain to form the backbone of its election manifesto and the pillars of the next Labour government as follows:

1. Secure the highest sustained growth in the G7
2. Make Britain a clean energy superpower
3. Build an NHS fit for the future
4. Break down the barriers to opportunity at every stage
5. Make Britain's streets safe.

It is important that rural communities benefit in full from the implementation of these missions and that they contribute to delivering our vision for rural and coastal communities as laid out in the Foreword - places where people can afford to live their best life, find rewarding work, study, enjoy nature and the culture that comes with it.

We know that countryside communities have the same concerns as those living in urban communities, but the solutions often come with added complexities. There are greater distances to access services, communities are often very small with high house prices and low wages.

Previous governments have talked of 'rural proofing' to ensure that rural areas are considered when designing and delivering policies. But this concept has clearly failed and the challenges facing rural areas remain.

The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) was established by the Labour government to promote awareness of rural needs amongst decision makers across and beyond government. It was abolished by the Conservative government in 2013. We would suggest that the reestablishment of a similar organisation, with independent oversight across government departments would be more effective

that the current rural proofing approach.

Rural communities are being hit hard as young people leave to seek better opportunities. Combine this with high numbers of people wanting to retire to the country means that unsurprisingly, rural communities are older than urban, and the age gap is widening, putting extra strain on health and social care services. Cuts to rural police services have increased concerns about crime with many people saying that they feel less safe. Houses are less affordable in rural areas than in urban; yet rural areas have twice the proportion of officially 'non-decent' homes as suburban residential areas. In an analysis of the energy performance certificates (EPC) of households, the Energy Saving Trust (EST) found that "nearly 20% of homes in rural areas are in the very energy inefficient F and G categories, compared to just 2.4% in urban areas". Local authority supported rural bus provision has declined by 54 per cent since 2011, filling country roads with more cars and making it very difficult for people who can't drive. Average public transport travel time to hospital is twice as long in rural areas as in urban. Broadband speeds and mobile coverage are poorer and is part of the reason that productivity is lower in rural areas than in urban.

Combine these factors with often poor job prospects and it's no surprise that the rural economy increasingly lags behind its urban neighbours.

This document lays out how a co-operative approach can address many of these and other challenges facing our rural communities.

Recommendation 1

Rural communities are part of the fabric of our country, so future governments need to ensure that they respond to the challenges faced by millions of people living in rural communities.

We believe that there is a strong case for an incoming Labour & Co-operative Government to immediately review rural policy and to establish a Standing Commission to monitor departments 'rural proofing' policies cross Government.

PUTTING COMMUNITIES IN CONTROL

“Co-operative approaches are about placing power directly in the hands of people and communities.”

Co-operative Party manifesto

Many people living in rural communities feel powerless in the face of centralised government decision making. That they have little or no control over important decisions that affect their local area, whether cuts in funding to health and education, losing bus services and in the wake of the destruction caused by storm Arwen, the literal powerlessness of over a million people disconnected from the UK power network.

The Labour Party has pledged to ‘spread control out of Westminster’ through a Take Back Control Bill.

This would devolve powers over employment support, transport, energy, climate change, housing, culture, childcare provision and council funding and to give communities a “right to request powers which go beyond this”.

This vision of English devolution provides an opportunity to embrace the co-operative approach for growth and greater equality, empowering our rural and coastal communities, helping to rebalance our economy and level the playing field of our democracy to ensure that our rural and coastal communities are not left behind.

There is a campaign running to persuade government to introduce a Community Power Act, building on the Localism Act and giving more control back to communities. The Labour Party’s commitment to further devolution could include these proposals, benefiting rural areas through its local, co-operative approach. They would:

- Give communities a legal right to self-determination so decisions about local services and spaces are made at the most local level possible, with the participation of local people.
- Bring communities and councils together to form Community Covenants that are defined by local people and reflect the dynamics of the local area, accessing a range of new powers and resources across local economic development, service provision, community assets, planning and housing.
- Create an independent Community Power Commissioner who will hold the government to account on its decentralisation commitments.

Decision-making needs to be based on local needs with a wide participation from residents, business and community groups to have resonance and impact – a ‘place-based’ approach. A focus on devolution and co-operation for rural and coastal England would be a stepping-stone to solving some of the major challenges.

CASE STUDY: BLACKDOWN HILLS PARISH NETWORK

The Devon and Somerset cross-border Blackdown Hills Parish Network pools resources into action groups tackling broadband and communication, planning and housing, traffic, transport and highways and climate and the environment.

It aims to identify, address and promote issues of common concern for the parishes and work for cohesion and consistency among the local authorities responsible for the AONB. As they say: *“Working together is the only way we will preserve the Blackdown Hills and its unique way of life, landscape, history and culture. Working together gives us a place at the table when strategic and important issues arise. Working together gives us a voice which is increasingly getting heard.”*

Recommendation 2

The Labour Party's commitment to further devolution should include a Community Power Act, building on the Localism Act and giving more control back to communities, and benefiting rural areas through its local, co-operative approach. There should be the option for rural areas to establish county mayors, replicating the devolution seen mainly for metropolitan areas.

The potential for Local Authorities and parish and town councils to deliver change

The Co-operative Party believes that local councils should be properly funded to ensure they can continue to deliver the services that people rely on. The Party also sees a need for a radical change in the way that local government works if it is to remain effective, relevant and accountable in this time of cuts in spending and changing expectations.

Parish and Town Councils are the first tier of local government and the closest to the community they serve. The range of services and amenities they provide varies enormously. Many provide public seats and shelters, litter bins and notice boards. Some provide recreation grounds, public halls, cemeteries, allotments and swimming pools. All play an important role in maintaining and improving local services and facilities, supporting local voluntary organisations and activities and influencing and lobbying on local development.

Communities need both power and influence to tackle the issues that matter most to local people and to allow them to shape the delivery of public services in their area and create a community they can be proud to live in.

Despite the growing role of parish councils in responding to the social, economic, and environmental needs of communities, they are not eligible to apply in their own right for government growth funds such as the Community Renewal Fund, Levelling Up Fund, Towns Fund, or UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). They are also excluded from the Community Ownership Fund. Funding pots such as the Shared Prosperity Fund should have a rural focus.

In order for parish and town councils to bring about real improvements to their local communities they should be eligible to apply for development funding beyond the current precept-raising powers.

The English devolution proposals in the Levelling-up Bill would not be available to unparished areas with the result that some of our most deprived communities won't have access to those opportunities. The prospect of turning unparished areas into parished should be explored to avoid discrimination.

Training and development of parish and town clerks and councillors can be patchy. Upskilling clerks and councillors is fundamental to raising the horizons of local councils so that they can develop effective and appropriate local approaches to economic development and tackle the challenges faced by their local communities. The Co-operative Party can support this by developing and promoting networks of local councillors to share best practice and promote the benefits of co-operation.

The Co-operative Party's manifesto¹ promotes participatory decision making and explains the importance of doing so in a transparent way that enables communities to develop solutions that work for them and understand why a course of action is decided upon.

Rural councils should be encouraged to develop projects and work with other councils to deliver improvements, and parish and town councils could be a vehicle for local development. There are many examples in the work being carried out by the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network², which pioneers new working relationships with neighbourhoods and residents, underpinned by a genuine commitment to working with local communities.

Case study: Co-operative Councils Innovation Network

The Co-operative Councils Innovation Network (CCIN) is a special interest group within the Local Government Association which is committed to promoting new innovative ways of working to deliver for communities. This centres around putting co-operative policy into action and promoting co-operation with local communities. The CCIN is a non-political body founded in 2012 and established on the principles of the International Co-operative Alliance.

The CCIN now has over 100 councils as members, including Birmingham City Council, Cardiff City Council and the Greater Manchester Combine Authority (GMCA). Co-operative projects worked on by CCIN including initiatives in community-led housing, growing the co-operative sector and community wealth building.

The Local Government Association (LGA) has consistently made the case for devolution through councils to communities. Local authority funded community facilitators should be appointed to work with local people in designing, commissioning (or decommissioning) and delivering services.

The value of online participation at council meetings was clearly demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic and supported local democracy in several different ways. For example, through increased attendance by both councillors and the public, greater transparency, improved equality of access to meetings and the increased opportunity for more people to stand for election as councillors. There were also significant cost savings for some councils and the environmental benefits of less travel.

This is of particular benefit in rural areas and should not be lost. Local, regional and national government should continue to make meetings available online.

The Co-operative Party believes that those who provide, receive and rely on services are best placed to know how to ensure they are run cost effectively and to a high quality. That means care recipients, their families, care workers and the wider community having a role in decision-making and social care service delivery. It means passengers and employees involved in the governance and

decision-making on local transport, and housing tenants involved in policies and decisions to do with their housing estates.

Local councils should ensure services have transparent, participatory governance structures, which give service users, workers and the wider community a say in how they are run. This is not about who provides the service – the Party supports insourcing – but in the way it is run so that voices outside the town hall can be heard.

Combine this with unlocking the potential of parish and town councils to empower their communities and you have the key to levelling up and improving local public services. This co-operative approach can bring local people and community groups together, set local priorities and shape the future of their neighbourhoods.

Recommendation 3

There should be greater investment in the lowest tier of local governance, with parish and town councils given more powers and a bigger say over the development and management of local services and facilities.

Recommendation 4

Parish and town councils should be able to develop amenities and given capital allocations to enable development where appropriate, they should be given a STOP or CALL IN power to prevent the loss of services and facilities, so that they are consulted before any final decision is made when a service is being withdrawn.

Recommendation 5

The development of super unitary authorities at county level and the emergence of mayoral county councils, parish and town councils are essential if we are to empower people and communities. In the move towards unitary authorities, many communities have lost any form of representation.

The Labour movement should invest in training and the development of those wishing to become parish and town councillors.

Recommendation 6

Members of the public should be given the opportunity to question elected representatives at all levels on decisions taken in their name.

STRENGTHENING THE RURAL ECONOMY

“Co-operation provides an antidote to many of the economy’s failings”

Co-operative Party Manifesto³

The rural economy is significant to the UK. According to the House of Commons Library, in 2015, economic output from predominantly rural areas contributed 6.5% of output in England and was worth an estimated £237 billion. Rural businesses accounted for 25% of all businesses in England in 2014/15 and 30% of those in Scotland in 2016⁴.

Yet the country is in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis with many areas struggling, and others not able to meet their full potential. While agriculture remains the backbone of rural life, many places have diversified leading to their economy becoming dependent on other sectors such as tourism and the hospitality industry, with low paid, seasonal work. With farming and the hospitality industry both being particularly affected by Brexit there is currently much uncertainty in the future.

Rural economies are diverse so we need different approaches to measure productivity, not just through economic impact, but social and environmental successes should be taken into consideration.

A 2022 analysis of the Government’s Levelling Up White Paper for the Rural Services Network (RSN)⁵ found that “were England’s rural communities a distinct region, their need for Levelling Up would be greater than that of any other part of the country”. To counter the tendency for rural areas to be overlooked in favour of urban ones, the RSN report calls for the Government to include more rural-relevant indicators in funding formula, such as work-placed based incomes, and ratio and rates of seasonal employment.

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Left Behind Communities makes recommendations to tackle these inequalities: “to tailor business support for rural businesses – such as through shared apprenticeships, and support for farmers who work collaboratively in cluster groups”, and for “shared

community transport initiatives delivered through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)”. The report⁶ also recommends “a strategic objective should be placed in all government departments, particularly DEFRA, to develop policies that will create growth and prosperity in the countryside.”

The House of Lords Select Committee report on the Rural Economy⁷ considers the role of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) which are now the main vehicle outside of central and local government for supporting local development. The report raised concerns about the effectiveness of LEPs in rural areas:

“In general, although we did hear examples of good practice, the picture we heard about the performance of LEPs in rural areas was largely negative. Some respondents and witnesses took the view that there was a fundamental problem for rural economies within the form in which LEPs had been introduced.”

The report went on to recommend that all LEPs containing notable rural areas must adopt a rural economic strategy. We suggest they should either be overhauled or replaced with a more effective alternative for rural areas.

Co-operatives have long been a staple of rural economic development, ensuring communities have access to the goods and services they need through a business model that builds the community, creating an environment where businesses and the local community can thrive and grow.

The Co-operative Party⁸ proposes that there should be a commitment to doubling the size of the Co-operative sector through a network of regional agencies or partnerships across England to enable practical, proactive co-operative development in every community, tailored to suit their own regions. Such an approach would mean the particular economic challenges that face different rural areas could be identified and tackled effectively.

It also proposes co-operative development organisations in every region – investing in

co-operative growth and transition to employee ownership. These should work with and support councils to play an active role in shaping a fairer, more co-operative local economy.

Recommendation 7

Co-operative principles should be at the heart of a diverse rural economy. A commitment to double the number of co-operatives would ensure that businesses are created or grown that are rooted in the local community.

Recommendation 8

The local agency should be comprised of people working and developing co-operative businesses in the region. They should be tasked to work with LEPs who should have co-operative models as part of their approach to business development.

Recommendation 9

LEPs and co-operative agencies should have funds to help grow local co-operatives, especially those involved in agroecological and sustainable net zero local enterprises.

Fiscal devolution

In many rural communities, local councils struggle to fund such initiatives. The UK is one of the most fiscally centralised countries in the developed world. Fiscal devolution has a role to play in kick-starting the rural economy and has been consistently called for by the Local Government Authority.

As the LGA says “Local Authorities in Germany, Switzerland and Holland can access a diverse range of revenue sources. They are also able to adjust and introduce local levies in consultation with their residents and businesses, innovating and diversifying their tax base in response to new public priorities, such as responding to climate change, and new forms of economic activity.”⁹

Alongside this the Co-operative Party calls for a reform of council tax so that it is based on income not property values. Devolving this new income-based rate would provide councils with significant funds as well as greater control. There should be further exploration of the case to devolve other taxes too, including local or regional tourist taxes and devolved land value taxes, which could have a significant impact in rural areas.

Community Wealth Building

An approach to economic development

strategy which directs wealth back into local communities is Community Wealth Building. It promotes localised economic development with a focus on growing co-operatives.

It is becoming increasingly established in urban areas following the pioneering work of Preston Council but there are some examples of community wealth building in rural areas – with West Lothian as an interesting example.

Parish and Town Councils have the potential to play a significant role in developing hyper-local approaches to Community Wealth Building and this should be developed and encouraged.

Recommendation 10

Community Wealth Building is one of the keys to unlocking the potential of communities where levelling up is critical to social and economic regeneration. Dormant Assets should be used to build up capital funds and channelled towards co-operative enterprises in priority areas.

Supporting business and jobs

Four fifths of rural employees work for an SME, roughly a quarter of the UK’s microbusinesses are located in rural areas and many workers are self-employed.

The Co-operative Party’s manifesto pledge on the self-employed is particularly important for the rural economy. It explains that the interests of self-employed workers are poorly represented in national policy making and not loud enough in individual and local workplace issues and makes the following proposals:

‘The rights of workers to trade union representation in the workplace must be enforced in every business – including those that rely on a largely self-employed workforce. At a national level, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy should identify how to create a voice for self-employed workers in business policy, regulation and commissioning, learning from the way in which the wider small business community has successfully become recognised’¹⁰.

The Co-operative Party’s ‘New Green Deal’¹¹ proposes a focus on good quality, well paid green jobs. In rural areas this could support the employment of more people to work on tree-planting, nature restoration and helping the public enjoy the outdoors. In agriculture, the creation of green jobs can deliver economic, environmental and

CASE STUDY: WEST LOTHIAN COUNCIL'S COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING

The West Lothian Council (WLC) has worked with the think tank CLES to develop a community wealth building programme. The objectives of West Lothian Council's Community Wealth Building are: plural ownership of the economy, making financial power work for local places, fair employment and just labour markets, progressive procurement of goods and services, and socially productive use of land and property.

The WLC is working with local anchor institutions, such as the NHS and further education colleges, local businesses and local communities to support the local economy, promoting the Living Wage and encourage the development of co-operatively owned businesses. The ambition is to retain greater wealth within the local economy and community, producing good jobs and encouraging fairer forms of business ownership.

The WLC has established a Community Wealth Building Team within the council which is responsible for expanding the programme. Funding has been committed to delivering a community wealth building plan, which aligns with the West Lothian Jobs Task Force to prioritise inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

The WLC is committed to increasing community ownership of land and assets in the locality and supports community asset transfer – which can help revive vacant properties into productive community use.

social sustainability. Green jobs can be attractive to young people and can provide opportunities to encourage them to live and work in rural communities.

Small businesses and the self-employed need access to advice and funding streams to develop. A national statutory body for rural businesses could be set up to listen to small businesses and how they address the challenges of sparsity and distance and to provide support for business set-up and growth.

For rural businesses and communities alike, improved and reliable digital connectivity is the key to achieving many of the other ambitions for levelling up.

The agriculture and food sector has the poorest safety record in industry and this needs to be actively addressed. This could be done through incentives for improved physical working conditions and practices and ensuring international trade does not undercut UK producers at the expense of ill health and injury to overseas workers.

Recommendation 11

The commission believes that, with SMEs dominating the rural economy, more could be done to support this sector and retain talent in rural communities. Self-employment and micro businesses should be supported and used as a

way of stimulating growth in rural economies with an emphasis on sustainable jobs contributing to net zero targets.

Procurement and public sector commissioning

The expected Procurement Act¹² aims to do more to support and encourage SMEs but it remains to be seen if smaller, local, co-operative and community-owned businesses will be able to win more contracts from the £300bn annual commissioning spend. More will need to be done to ensure diverse markets are an outcome of the commissioning process. Two areas where rural communities can benefit from public sector commissioning in particular are the food industry and social care.

According to the National Food Strategy¹³ the public sector serves 1.9 billion meals per year, over 5 % of the total turnover of the UK food service sector. It therefore provides a unique opportunity to impact on our food system. Yet much of the food that the public sector delivers is of poor nutritional quality.

The Southwest of England has pioneered some innovative public procurement schemes such as the Cornwall Food Programme which promoted healthier and more locally produced hospital meals as far back as 2001, or more recently, the Bath and North Somerset pilot dynamic procurement system.

This enabled 20 producers to sell their produce direct to 60 schools through an online platform, consolidating small orders and allowing small farmers to sell into public contracts.

Case Study: Bristol and North East Somerset Pilot

Procurement officers at the Bath & North East Somerset Council have led the way in the development of the Dynamic Food Procurement (DFP) model, by establishing a new procurement plan which seeks to break down the barriers to entry for SME and co-operative suppliers.

The goal of the pilot DFP model was to improve the quantity and choice of fresh, local and sustainable food to schools while delivering value to the taxpayer. The inclusivity to new suppliers was fostered by providing assistance to farmers who were tendering for procurement contracts for the first time.

Following the introduction of the DFP model by the Council, the pilot successfully delivered the ingredients for over 2.3 million meals over two years whilst simultaneously reducing supply chain carbon emissions and food waste. The model has continued to be adopted by other authorities off the back of the Bath & North East Somerset Council's awarding-winning success.

Dynamic Procurement requires government funding and a clear plan to bring producers and the public sector together. It also provides real opportunities for innovative agrarian co-operatives to supply larger scale public sector consumers, without reliance on conventional markets.

A proposal is for mandatory regulation of at least 50% of food consumed in the public sector to have been procured from SME producers, in each region and nation of the UK.

Social care procurement can support rural communities by ensuring that the special features and sometimes sizes of co-operative and social enterprise delivery models are taken account of and included in procurement exercises.

For example, NEDcare is representative of the many thousands of organisations providing services

to rural communities which could do so much more if it was easier to win contracts from the public sector.

Case Study: NEDCare providing regulated care across North East Dartmoor

NEDCare was set up in 2016 by a small group of local people, in response to what co-founder Julia Darby termed the 'significant lack' of regulated care on offer in the local area. Many people in the local community not able to access the care and support they needed, increasing the risk of worsening health conditions or hospital admission.

It now offers over 1000 hours of care each month in the local community.

Recommendation 12

Tendering processes for local authorities and public bodies should include an obligation to test the market locally for co-operatives to be on tender lists to provide services.

Recommendation 13

Social care co-operatives and nursery co-operatives have shown what can be achieved. Similarly, agri-businesses run as co-operatives have a track record of success and procurement practices should encourage more to enter the market.

Education and skills

For the rural economy to grow and be successful, routes to education and skills need to be centre stage. We know that in many areas there is a skills and labour shortage and that supply chains need developing.

There needs to be access to education, skills and training opportunities for rural young people so that if they want to continue to live and work in their local area there are attractive opportunities for them to do so.

There are challenges around transport to schools and further and higher education. College transport is not subsidised and there may not be easy transport options to work placements for T levels. Also, apprenticeships may not help financially with additional travel costs. Clearly more co-ordination and sustainable transport options are needed.

Strengthening the Rural Economy

Additionally, there are often difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers and trainers. This is partly caused by the lack of well-paid, skilled employment for their partners in rural areas.

During the pandemic there were many opportunities for online learning. This needs to be harnessed and grown to create further opportunities for skills development and education.

The Co-operative Party's 'Steps to Success' policy document includes very relevant proposals for rural areas on apprenticeships and skills. Firstly, the statutory provision of a careers service and secondly increasing the flexibility of the Apprenticeship Levy.

The legal requirement to provide career services to people across the UK would help young people to understand fully the different options that are available to them in a rural area. The proposal that this new service could be delivered by career service co-operatives, which local people could become members of, would work effectively in rural areas.

Increasing the flexibility of Apprenticeship Levy spending criteria would enable a larger number of apprenticeships to be created. The current funding system suits certain sectors more than others – with the lack of flexibility raising the cost of training in sectors like retail.

Additional flexibility to cover the true costs of training would enable an expansion of available apprenticeship opportunities and this could have a significant impact on the number of apprenticeships created in rural jobs.

This could include increasing the numbers of land-based apprenticeships and those in National Parks. The time and cost needed for farmers to take on apprentices can be challenging. A further increase in the amount of Apprenticeship Levy that can be transferred from large to small businesses should be considered.

Comprehensive vocational training should also be in place for everyone working in the food industry and an agricultural advice and training service, including agroecology and community food systems, should be established. This should include support for farmer organisations to encourage innovation and co-operation.

The Shared Prosperity Fund could also be deployed to help to fund these skills shortage and education challenges.

The two largest sector employers in rural areas are food and farming and tourism and hospitality. Both are struggling with a lack of staff following Brexit and new immigration laws. Food has been left to rot in fields and hotels have been unable to open fully. There has also been an impact on NHS and social care workers.

The Co-operative Party's proposal to set up a Royal Commission on immigration, with a view to developing a new immigration policy based on fact not fear-mongering, and with the principles of transparency, compassion, fairness and prosperity at its heart, is an important step in helping to support and grow the rural economy in these areas.

Recommendation 14

With skills and labour shortages an issue it is essential that the needs of the rural economy are matched by skills development providers at schools, colleges and within employment. There needs to be a step change in opportunities for young people. We recommend greater flexibility in the operation of the Apprenticeship Levy and the development of a tailored careers service recognising the special needs of the rural economy through an agricultural advice and training service. This should reflect the major rural economic drivers of farming and hospitality sectors.

Revitalising high streets

The high street is the beating heart of the local economy – for shopping, leisure and accessing services plus as a centre of employment in retail and service industries.

In many towns and cities, however, the high street faces increasing challenges and is in decline. This was only exacerbated by the pandemic which led to an increase in shopping online. Online retailers have a significant impact on high street sales, and they can provide the same products for less because of not having to pay rents or business rates.

The tax system has not kept up with changes to consumer habits and needs reforming. This could take the form of an online sales or transaction tax, or VAT could differentiate between in-store and online sales to create a more level playing field between online and bricks-and-mortar business.

The current system of business rates also needs reforming. There needs to be a more progressive, much fairer form of business taxation including

Recommendation 15

High Streets are the beating heart of our rural towns and are a key place for communities to meet and access essential services. Many of these services have been stripped away – including banks. We support the Co-operative Party's Access to Banking Standard, which should be overseen by the Financial Conduct Authority.

Town councils in particular should be encouraged to play a role in re-shaping and re-purposing the high street and encourage co-operative solutions to service providers wishing to share premises costs and reduce overheads. Business rates should be reformed and reductions used to further stimulate high street retail.

Coastal towns and the fishing industry

Our coastal communities are by their very nature at the end of the line and face many of the same challenges as rural communities and rely on many of the same employment sectors, for example tourism.

However, many also have the added impact and uncertainty that the fishing industry faces following Brexit. The fishing industry is important both economically and socially for many coastal towns. In 2015, fishing contributed £604 million to UK GDP and employed just over 12,000 fishers. But the impacts of leaving the EU for the fishing industry are highly uncertain with much depending on future negotiations with the EU and future UK Government policy.

The cultural connections between fishing communities and inshore fishing needs to be properly recognised. This would allow investment and support for the industry and improve access for new entrants through training, licences, quota where needed, affordable credit and financial advice, and making eco-labelling schemes accessible to small-scale fishers.

The funding of the Association of Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities should be prioritised alongside the delivery of improved harbourside infrastructure. Supply chains should be looked at in order to bring added value to local produce and improve profitability to small-scale fishers.

It also needs to be recognised that small-scale inshore fishers struggle to compete with the

a land value tax. Until this happens, business rates should urgently be reduced and reformed. For example, high street retailers should not be penalised for offering services to the community such as a free ATM.

Small rural towns are also suffering from the closure of bank branches and the loss of cash machines. According to recent research, cash machines around the UK are closing at a rate of 300 a month, and there are over 3,000 communities in Britain that no longer have a single bank branch, especially in smaller towns. These are vital not just for consumers, particularly those who can't or don't want to bank online, but also for SMEs who rely on local branches to manage their business banking.

The closure of banks has a knock-on effect to the health of our high streets as footfall declines, leading to more shop closures.

The Co-operative Party proposes that a new Access to Banking Standard should be introduced to protect the continued existence of the "last bank in town", supervised by the Financial Conduct Authority and penalised when banks fail to uphold that standard, with the funds from any fines spent on financial inclusion and development of credit unions.

While retail is an important part of the town centre mix, our high streets are also focal points for local identity, community pride, heritage and values. A working paper from the LSE for Power to Change presented case studies of community businesses on the high street and how these contribute to high street regeneration. The case studies included the old library in Bodmin, Midsteeples quarter in Dumfries, Hebden Bridge town centre and Made in Ashford.

The co-operative movement grew from the shop floor and today plays an active role on many high streets – from the co-operative supermarkets selling good quality food and providing post office services, to the communities coming together to rescue their local pub and the credit union continuing to provide financial services after the last bank has left town. This co-operative approach can grow and play a vital role in securing the future of our high streets.

CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY-LED HIGH STREET REGENERATION IN DUMFRIES

Community-led high street regeneration has been increasing in recent years, with community groups taking a lead in repurposing vacant and derelict properties on the high street to create new mixed-used civic spaces with diversified offerings for leisure, retail and residential.

In the Scottish town of Dumfries, a community-led initiative has begun the rejuvenation of a town centre high street through the Midsteeples Quarter community benefit society (CBS). This community benefit society was established by the people of Dumfries in order to counteract the decline of the town centre – which had been badly impacted by the rise of out-of-town retail, online retail services and the perception that the high street had become a ‘Clone Town’. The Midsteeples Quarter group identified a town centre block of vacant buildings which were falling into disrepair. Over the course of several years, the Midsteeples Quarter project has purchased these buildings and returned them to productive use – providing space for local businesses, co-operatives, social enterprises and creative projects. Through the CBS’s work the Midsteeples Quarter now contains a mixed-use civic space with retail, creative and residential offerings.

industrial fleets further offshore. There should be some checks on the behaviour of those large-scale fleets, for example setting overall catch limits at sustainable levels and banning the most destructive forms of fishing from offshore Marine Protected Areas.

There are 65 co-operatives in the UK’s fishing sector, with a collective turnover of £48.1m. Co-operative structures, as with farming, allow fishers to pool risk and access bigger markets. It also enables the sector to work together collaboratively to protect the long-term sustainability of the UK’s seas. Whatever agreement on fishing in UK waters comes out of future negotiations, the underlying inequalities in distribution of quotas needs to be addressed if coastal communities and small-scale fishers are to succeed.

Fishing quotas should be distributed based on social, economic and environmental criteria. This should be accompanied by greater transparency of the UK’s Fishing Quota Register. Support should be given to existing fishing co-operatives to grow, and to new co-operatives to start up. This should be targeted at those coastal towns where the fishing industry has been in steepest decline.

Marine restoration should be prioritised and more projects such as the pioneering marine rewilding project to restore almost 200 square kilometres of lost kelp forest along the coast of Sussex.

Recommendation 16

Fishing co-operatives have led the way in finding innovative solutions to retaining and growing the fishing industry. In too many small towns and fishing villages fishing has been forced out or become peripheral economically. We support the funding of the Association of Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities and want to see the adoption of quota policies based on social, economic, and environmental criteria. More should be done by Government to protect our inshore fishing heritage and promote a UK market.

Sustainable tourism

Tourism is important to rural economies. According to the House of Commons library, overseas visitors whose visits included a trip to the countryside or villages spent an estimated £4.2 billion in the UK in 2011.

There are a high number of small businesses and self-employed people working in tourism in rural areas and it can create employment and opportunities for growth where few other opportunities exist. For example, through farm diversification, by supplementing the income streams of farms while at the same time helping to maintain the environment and landscape which are appreciated by visitors and the local communities.

Visitors also help to sustain the local economy by supporting shops, pubs, restaurants and bus

services for example.

The development of rural tourism should be carefully managed so that it supports the natural environment and minimises any negative impact caused by visitors. Local community groups and stakeholders should work together to drive forward any new initiatives for the benefit of the local area.

This should include how to make the countryside more accessible to all. For example, through measures such as reinstating 'school farms' or taking part in fieldwork in the countryside.

Worker and social co-operatives could be promoted in the tourism industry to ensure the stronger involvement of local communities, environmental sustainability, and accessibility for everyone (regardless of age, health and economic profile).

Such co-operatives have the capacity to benefit the local area through a stronger economy, employment, sustainability, the natural environment and promoting the local cultural and historical links.

Recommendation 17

Making tourism more sustainable in environmental and economic terms should inform the development of the visitor economy. The national network of co-operative development agencies should be mobilised to promote worker and social co-operatives.

Recommendation 18

Everyone should have access to our natural environment but it is important that our national parks are protected.

Worker and social co-operatives could be promoted in the tourism industry to ensure the stronger involvement of local communities, environmental sustainability, and accessibility for everyone (regardless of age, health and economic profile).

A CO-OPERATIVE APPROACH TO AGRICULTURE

“Co-operative models in agriculture help farmers to mitigate risk, achieve economies of scale and invest collectively in innovation and efficiencies.”

Co-operative Party Manifesto

Sustainable agriculture and food justice

Our co-operative movement grew out of a fundamental belief that the ordinary working people of Britain should have access to healthy, affordable food as one of the key building blocks of a decent life. Achieving food justice and tackling hunger is a huge endeavour and will require profound, long-term, concerted change – but the co-operative sector already helps lead the way, including partnerships with Fareshare to redistribute surplus food, keeping local supermarkets open in communities left behind by other retailers, and helping to campaign for food justice.

The co-operative movement has a long history of farming, since the Rochdale pioneers of the 1840s, and there is an important place for co-operative, nature positive farming in the 21st century. Co-operative farming has, however, diminished in the UK and now accounts for just 6% of the domestic agricultural market share in comparison to European countries such as Spain (45%), France (55%) and the Netherlands (68%).

But over 140,000 British farmers are members and co-owners of over 400 agricultural and farmer co-operatives. They are also custodians of our countryside and play a key role in protecting the natural environment.

There are numerous benefits of co-operative farming. This is especially true for small-scale farmers as it allows for cost saving, sharing of best practice and help to retain value throughout the supply chain and through the marketing of their products. For example through increasing economic resilience in the face of volatility, uncertainty and the risk of recession; consolidating bargaining power in a tough trading environment; providing the

social capital that farmers will need in adapting to change; and by offering established platforms for farmers to collaborate in providing and being paid for environmental public goods.

Case Study: Arla Foods UK

One of the largest agricultural co-operatives in the UK, Arla Foods UK is owned by over 3,200 British farmers across the country.

Arla Foods UK now provides over a quarter of the UK's milk supply, with brands including Cravendale Milk and Anchor Butter. At Arla, each farmer has a vote, with members being elected to the Board through democratic process. All farmer owners receive an equal share of the profits, helping to improve farmers income, resources and resilience to economic shocks.

Environmental sustainability is critical to the agricultural sector and Arla is assisting efforts to reduce emissions by paying more to farmers who are meeting sustainability targets.

Any government should look to increase the number of farming co-operatives by improving the quality of advice available, facilitating additional development funding and providing innovation support for existing co-operatives, particularly at smaller and mid-scales.

Recommendation 19

The history of co-operative farming practices should help the UK lead the way in good practice. Currently just 6% of domestic agricultural output comes from the co-operative sector by comparison with Spain 45%, France 55% and Holland 68% - the UK requires nature positive co-operatively owned solutions to reinvigorate this sector. A new Labour & Co-operative Government should aim to incentivise farming co-operative growth.

Sustainable food production

Our food systems are leaving many people behind: from those experiencing food insecurity or working in the food industry with low wages and insecure working conditions, to those coping with diet-related ill health, and to the large numbers of food producers struggling to make a living. Food production is also a major contributor to climate change and biodiversity loss and is driving global soil quality loss and antibiotic resistance. And this is why we believe that ownership matters, and that the state has a role in encouraging co-operative, community-owned, and small- and medium-sized farms in order to deliver food security and guarantee food sovereignty.

But in the sixth-richest country on earth, people are going hungry. There should be a Fair Food Act which incorporates a commitment to zero hunger by 2030 (SDG 2) into UK law. There should also be Ministerial responsibility for tackling food insecurity and a right to food.

The Chartered Institute of Horticulture has said that business, production and food in the UK horticulture industry is worth over £5bn each year. It has estimated that businesses growing fruit and vegetables employ over 50,000 people, with the ornamental plant nurseries and garden centres that produce and sell millions of plants for decorative rather than practical use generating thousands more jobs.

But as a country we need to increase our production of fruit and vegetables. More support in areas such as research and development, sustainable production and skills and training could enable the industry to grow.

At the same time, we need a food supply chain that operates fairly for consumers, business and workers from farm to fork, and delivers high environmental and animal welfare standards. Markets should enrich local economies, protect farmers and farming landscapes and allow consumers to access affordable fresh, healthy, seasonal produce.

Labelling and advertising should encourage consumers to choose locally produced food. Policy instruments, including tariffs where necessary, should be considered to prevent imports with lower food production standards and/or animal welfare standards from undermining local production.

And low prices in supply chains need addressing. Co-operative working can help reduce price

volatility. One large project investigated 500 farmer co-ops across 27 EU countries and eight sectors, including dairy, lamb, pork, cereals and horticulture. The study concluded co-operatives have an important role to play in securing better prices for farmers and help to ease the cost-price squeeze, thus reducing volatility.

The power of supermarkets needs to be managed so that food producers are paid a fair price for their product. One way to achieve this is increase the powers, remit and resources of the Groceries Code Adjudicator to ensure fair trade and pricing for food producers.

Diversification can also help to manage volatility. Traditionally this has taken the form of farm shops, letting out buildings or setting up caravan or camping sites. However, there are other opportunities that could be encouraged such as renewable energy technology, educational centres and nature recovery. Agricultural co-operatives have an important role to play in UK farming and in all of these areas bringing farms together in a co-operative can open up opportunities and enable access to high-quality advice.

However, the Tenant Farmers Association has drawn attention to restrictions in tenancy agreements that prevent tenant farmers from diversifying their business. We believe that tenancy reform is needed including in relation to tenancy agreements.

Recommendation 20

The co-operative movement grew out of the belief that we should all share in access to good quality, affordable food. We recommend that the next Labour government introduce a Fair Food Act incorporating a commitment to zero hunger by 2030. This should be linked to the creation of a ministerial responsibility for tackling food insecurity and a right to food.

Recommendation 21

Intervention through funding, advice and the development of innovation support could unlock the benefits of shared cost savings, joint product marketing and collective bargaining power getting better deals with supermarkets. We would encourage the adoption of the Dutch Model which led to improved bio-diversity and improved nature positive approaches and more cost-effective farming practices.

CASE STUDY: CO-OPERATIVE FARMING IN THE 'DUTCH MODEL'

The 'Dutch model' provides a useful case study of an approach to nature-positive co-operative. The model adopts a cross-farm approach to improve biodiversity through agri-environment schemes that preference a regional approach. The view was this would be more cost-effective, simplify the administrative process and reflect the long tradition of agri-environment co-operatives (their number having grown to 160 over the last 20 years).

How does it work?

It adopts what is called a "front door-back door principle". At the "front door" the government signs a contacts with the regional co-operative setting the agri-environment targets with the regional co-operative and describing the types of activities used to achieve these targets (e.g. rewilding, wetland creation etc.). At the "back door" the co-operative concludes contracts with individual land users, which include specific activities and payments needed at field level to realise the habitat at a landscape level. Between each "door" fine-tuning of conservation activities and payments take place.

Benefits

1. Increased environmental output.
 - a. A co-ordinated cross-farm approach can be more beneficial for species and habitats that exceed farm level, such as farmland birds and ecological corridors and improve water, soil and air quality by reducing the impact of negative inputs through collaboration.
 - b. Increased scheme coverage and participation.
 - c. Greater stakeholder input through regional coordination
 - d. Stronger ecological guidance due to nature of character and routine amongst Dutch farmers which professionalises the management.
2. Increased flexibility
 - a. Due to the compatibility of the Paying Agency and the co-operatives real-time notification is possible making changes possible up to 14 days before the activity is due to be carried out, making innovation and optimal use of local knowledge that reflects the direct needs of the land at that time possible.
 - b. Co-operatives can establish internal financial policy, making adjustments to the individual payments and local circumstances possible.
3. Reduced implementation costs and error rates.
 - a. By applying as a co-operative, this reduces the number of applications from 13,000 to 40, meaning the Paying Agency can lower its expenses.
 - b. Simplified communication at a regional level.
 - c. Reduction in paperwork for farmers.
 - d. Improved quality of application through simplifying and streamlining of administrative procedure.

Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs)

Both farming and horticulture have been facing significant challenges with Brexit. Farming with leaving the Common Agriculture Policy and the removal of the Basic Payments System and both industries with the loss of the supply of labour.

The number one issue all farm businesses are facing is the removal of the Basic Payments System and the lack of detail and clarity about future support payments, with tenant farmers expressing particular concerns.

The Government has not been funding Farm Transition Plan pilots fully or fast enough to deliver the necessary evidence to yet make judgements about the new Environment Land Management schemes (ELMs), but what is crystal clear is that the roll-out of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) has had a very slow take-up – the Public Accounts Committee have not held back in their criticism of DEFRA on this matter.¹⁴

While most farmers support making farms more sustainable economically and environmentally, in practical terms they are seeing significant reductions in income whilst the new payment system is still embryonic. Our co-operative policy offer must ensure that ELMs is attractive to all farmers regardless of the size of their holding.

This changing environment provides an opportunity for increasing co-operatives. Many farmers may be considering alternative business models. For example, joint-ventures, share/contract farming and Producer Organisations are all different forms of co-operation and will offer opportunities and benefits to different owners.

Where the barriers to success are removed or can be overcome 'innovative agrarian co-operatives' are not just surviving but thriving. For example, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes, Agroecological Land Co-operatives (ALC) and Multi-Stakeholder Co-operatives (MSC), which bring together workers, producers and consumers, are now well proven models of co-operation. These and other forms of producer and consumer co-operatives, have the potential to be dramatically scaled up, within a more conducive policy environment.

Co-operative models in agriculture help farmers to mitigate risk, achieve economies of scale and invest

collectively in innovation and efficiencies. Some of the funds currently spent on direct payments to landowners should be put into an agricultural co-operative development fund, which would provide loans and grant funding for existing co-operatives to grow and new co-operatives to start up.

There should also be support for innovation and skills development to support the next generation in delivering a new set of outcomes. Farming and the wider food sector need specific training provision, including for small businesses which are the lifeblood of rural communities.

With farming being the biggest driver to biodiversity decline in the UK there need to be adequate and accessible payments to encourage farmers to sign up to schemes to restore nature and reverse biodiversity decline.

The concern is that farmers may turn to more intensive farming in order to secure their income. For example, in Herefordshire, the poultry capital of the UK, some farmers are putting in large intensive poultry units. The River Wye is now suffering from appalling levels of pollution with the likely causes being from the poultry units and from raw sewage being pumped into the river.¹⁵

We need a twin-track approach to promoting innovative agrarian co-operatives for SMEs and conventional agricultural co-operatives for larger entrepreneurial farms, that recognises the increasing polarisation in the sector. This should be partnered with a focus on an agroecological transition for SMEs, to promote national and local food security, biodiversity and healthy food and nutrition, and a more agri-tech oriented focus for larger farms to achieve net-zero carbon commitments within a competitive international market.

We also need to change the conversation on organic as a way forward for farming to move away from highly intensive farming practices. The organic option is something that the government should be prepared to support.

ELMs also need to be expanded to provide financial and regulatory support for the creation of localised processing/distribution facilities in every region, for example food hubs, abattoirs and communal processing units. This in turn will provide more local job opportunities.

A Co-operative Approach to Agriculture

Overall, we need to ensure the transition to our future agriculture is fair to farmers, better for wildlife and affordable for us all.

Farming should also be supported by reforming the planning system to enable more agricultural tied properties to be built on agroecological farms.

Recommendation 22

The Basic Payment Scheme is being removed without sufficient clarity about its replacement. It is likely to create perverse incentives as a drive for profits becomes more important, encouraging farming practices like those along the River Wye which impact adversely on the environment. Tenant farmers in particular are likely to be adversely affected.

Our enquiry suggests we need to expand ELMs to provide financial and regulatory support for localised processing and distribution facilities. For example, the development of food hubs with abattoirs and communal processes which would bring the added benefit of new employment opportunities. It should also be noted that horticulture is not part of the ELMs scheme.

Recommendation 23

Co-operation and co-operatives should be at the heart of a drive for more sustainable and equitable farming in the UK. The Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes, Agroecological Land Co-operatives (ALC) and Multi-Stakeholder Co-operatives (MSC) are well proven methods of rural co-operation and should be actively promoted by both local and central government departments.

County Farms

But many of these actions will only have a real impact on larger farms. Half of all farms in the UK are smallholdings. Most Government subsidies go to larger landowners, while holdings below 5ha get no subsidy at all. The inheritance tax system encourages wealthy individuals to invest in land, making the price of even a small area of land out of reach for most new entrants wanting to farm. The County Smallholdings estate has been shrinking, as Local Authorities sell off their land to plug gaps in funding.

These and other barriers disproportionately affect new entrants to farming and horticulture. But a revived county farm estate has the potential to act as a beacon, showcasing best practice in

sustainable farming. It could and should be at the core of local authority climate change and biodiversity policies, whilst also delivering outcomes in other policy areas, most notably health and wellbeing, education, inclusion and diversity.

The average age of Britain's farmers is now 59, and nearly 4 in 10 farmers are over 65. More research is needed to explore why, in such a physically demanding industry, older farmers seem reluctant to hang up their wellies. The Government's Lump Sum Exit scheme¹⁶ is designed to encourage older farmers to retire in a managed way. However, it is simply insufficient an intervention to bring new blood into what is a difficult industry to enter. The Co-operative Party has proposed protection, and indeed growth, of County Farms which have traditionally been a cost-effective way for people to enter the farming industry.

Agricultural policy should support County Smallholdings by addressing the pressure on local authorities to sell land, introducing a moratorium on selling off County Farms and instead promoting them as a training ground for new entrant farmers and growers.

In 'Building a Fairer Future' – the Co-operative Plan for Britain 2019¹⁷, we cited "Norway's model of supporting diverse ownership and small and medium-sized farms, accompanied by payments which reward public good". Small farmers and growers need policy support to promote 'horizontal co-operation' (e.g. multi-stakeholder co-operatives of producers and consumers) working together to add value to their produce. This will be critical to preventing the loss of even more of our small family and community farms and further degradation of our national food security.

Recommendation 24

There should be a moratorium on the selling off of County Farms and intervention by government and legislative protection of County Farms should be considered. County Farms should be promoted as a training ground for new entrant farmers and growers.

Recommendation 25

Government subsidies should be targeted at encouraging co-operative models in the agri-business sector. Cheap affordable homes tied to agricultural employment should be facilitated through the planning system to prevent agricultural workers being priced out of local housing markets.

Land use

The House of Lords' recent report *"Making the most out of England's land"¹⁸* makes the point that land use in England is changing radically. It says, *"Moving away from a landscape dominated by food production, we are now facing the challenges and opportunities of a new environment where nature and biodiversity restoration, carbon sequestration, new development and infrastructure needs and the role of the land for energy, access and wellbeing are all taking on a greater priority."*

Any rural policy development needs to take account of these changes and competing challenges. The Report proposes the setting up of an independent, statutory arms-length Land Use Commission.

Adopting a co-operative approach to land use in agriculture has the potential to bring multiple environmental benefits. Orchard planting provides an example of this. In the UK, 90% of the fruit we eat is imported, however, there is untapped potential for the creation of community orchards to bring co-benefits to the environment and society. Not only can they prevent the creation of monoculture, increase biodiversity, and reduce carbon but they can also improve community cohesion, access to nature and physical wellbeing.

With an enhanced focus on approaches such as these, this can not only create environmental benefits but also jobs and nutritional security.

Recommendation 26

Though agriculture's contribution to the national economy was 0.49% and its share of employment was 1.44% in 2020, it accounts for 71% of land use.

There should be fair funding support and fair pricing to agriculture that also gives recognition to farmers as the custodians of nature.

CLIMATE CHANGE & NATURE

“Tackling climate change and protecting the environment are collective efforts, and require mutual trust”

Co-operative Party manifesto¹⁹

The scale of change needed to halt environmental destruction, adapt and build resilience to the damage already incurred is a major challenge requiring urgent action from policymakers and the Government, so it is vital climate change and nature are central to a co-operative approach to rural policy.

Recommendation 27

We need to be more ambitious if we are to succeed in halting environmental destruction and build greater resilience into rural communities struggling with the impact of climate change.

Reaching net zero

The UK has committed to a target to reach net zero by 2050, however the Co-operative Party believes this is not ambitious enough, and the UK should adopt a science-based 2030 zero carbon target. Meeting this target will require international co-operation to ensure that emissions aren't offshored elsewhere, which is why the Co-operative Party is also calling for the continuation of international action on climate change by playing a leading role in pressing for and delivering international agreements.²⁰

In order to achieve a just transition to net zero the Co-operative Party believes a new green industrial strategy is needed to recognise, capitalise on, and encourage further growth in green good and services. Industry accounts for 33% of all UK emissions, 25% from the direct use of oil and gas and 8% from electricity demand. Of this, manufacturing is responsible for approximately 60% - or a fifth of total carbon emissions.²¹

The industrial strategy should include the following themes:

1. Strategic and practical support for the co-operative movement to start up, grow and succeed in low carbon technologies and green industry.

2. A focus on good quality green jobs.
3. Rebalancing the economy and ensuring no community is left behind.
4. Building on high environmental standards to become world leaders in green industries.
5. A focus on productivity.

Further details of these themes can be found in our [‘A Co-operative Green New Deal’](#) policy paper.²²

Recommendation 28

The document ‘A Co-operative Green New Deal’ is as much about rural approaches as urban ones. We believe that developing a low carbon technology sector and green industries in rural communities should be an essential part of the national industrial sector. This will require the development of green jobs in rural areas that are more sustainable and given support to secure a fair and just transition.

Energy challenges and fuel poverty

Transitioning to a low carbon economy is a priority, however, in the current cost-of-living crisis it must be managed in a way that supports communities struggling the most. With energy bills predicted to rise to over £3,600 a year, over £300 a month for the average family, whilst the profits of energy companies skyrocket, providing support is essential.

Fuel poverty in rural areas can be driven by rising fuel prices, an ageing housing stock that is not adequately insulated, a lack of access to gas, and the cost of fuel delivery to more sparsely populated areas.

Labour's announcement of the creation of a publicly owned Great British Energy company is a great start²³, but this must be backed up with measures to support people on a day-to-day basis through means that benefit the entire community. If people have a greater stake in the energy they use, we believe this would be a useful incentive for reducing consumption and reshaping our understanding the energy we use.

The Co-operative Party are therefore calling for the creation of a new £90 million National Community Energy Fund to help deliver transformative change

to the energy system, by building renewable energy capacity and putting communities in control. The fund would create 150,000 new community energy owners and be composed of three individual financial mechanisms:

1. A £30m grant fund to enable community energy projects across the country to get off the ground.
2. A revolving development loan scheme for starting new projects and
3. A revolving construction loan scheme to help the building of new community energy installations, such as wind turbines.²⁴

Any new government must also recognise the role that communities are already playing in the transition to a low carbon economy and the value that community energy brings to future decarbonisation.

Recommendation 29

Rocketing energy costs, obscene corporate profits amid growing poverty make the case for a form of intervention that brings fairness and environmental best practice together. The development of the Great British Energy company will change the nature of our energy market and should support the creation of new community energy schemes. As part of the transition the Co-operative Party is calling for the creation of a £90m National Community Fund to create 150,000 new community energy owners. This would enable small scale wind turbine construction creating local community owned energy production.

Nature restoration

Our National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty cover a quarter of England's land and are home to over 2.3 million people. They generate more than £20 billion for the rural economy, and support 75,000 jobs. Bold action in a holistic approach is required in order to make them greener, more beautiful and still open for everyone to enjoy.

We need to restore the natural environment of Britain in a network of large, connected areas across the entire country, founded on our national parks. They can be connected to restored pathways, hedgerows and water courses and to smaller protected conservation areas. Connecting natural corridors will allow animal migrations, seed dispersals and provide habitats in their own right, and can lead onwards into the parks and gardens

of our town and city centres along railway lines, canals, footpaths and cycle routes.

Everyone benefits from greater access to green, open spaces. The physical health benefits of easy access to clean air are undoubted and the therapeutic mental health and well-being effect of open spaces and proximity to a healthy natural environment are well understood.

There needs to be investment in facilities to enable better access for disabled people and in organised countryside activities for young people from BAME and economically disadvantaged communities, including those living in inner cities and left behind neighbourhoods.

Research for Defra found that while only half of farmers were co-op members, as many as 80% collaborated informally. Groups such as the Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN) and Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), although not formal co-operatives, do reflect the ethos of co-operative farming by facilitating and leading best-practice approaches to nature positive farming.

An example is the Integrated Local Delivery (ILD) model which inspires and enables farmers and communities to come together to build resilience, supported by an all-inclusive partnership of organisations working together at a local level.

Another example of this approach is 'Systematic Conservation Planning'. This approach has been adopted by Water Resources East to develop a natural capital plan for Eastern England. The plan will be "stakeholder led and will seek to identify where natural capital action should be prioritised across the landscape in order to deliver outcomes for nature, water and society."²⁵

It works as a combination of two things: a social process, and a prioritisation analysis. This identifies how and where to act to improve natural capital in the most cost-effective manner and gives stakeholders ownership over the plans.

The aim of the project is to create a 'shared vision' for nature restoration that can be owned by the stakeholders across the region that is reflective of their goals.²⁶ WRE have noted the project will provide new approaches to conservation such as rewilding to create wilder and more connected landscapes, restoration to achieve Biodiversity Net Gain, habitat creation and deliver nature-based solution for food management and carbon sequestration.²⁷

Climate Change & Nature

Local Nature Recovery Strategies are a new, England-wide system of spatial strategies, established through the Environment Act, that establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature's recovery and provide wider environmental benefits.

They should be facilitated through local authorities, working together with partners and linked to funding and resources necessary to design, implement and monitor these strategies, including appropriate job creation schemes.

Recommendation 30

We recommend a programme of nature recovery to create more connected landscapes, achieve greater biodiversity, habitat creation and deliver nature-based solutions for food management and carbon sequestration. It is likely that this will require targeted incentives to achieve as part of partnership with farming communities based around the network of co-operatives.

ACCESS TO SERVICES

“Co-operative and mutual models offer important lessons for the delivery of public services”

Co-operative Party Manifesto²⁸

Access to services for people who live in rural areas is often poor compared to their urban neighbours – to health and welfare services, education and employment, reducing their income and life chances.

Some reasons for this are easily recognised, for example poor transport links and increased distance from centres of provision.

As the Co-operative Party manifesto²⁹ says our public services must be high quality, responsive and accountable. The level of funding cuts to services our communities rely on, from local government and social care to the NHS and policing, make this an increasingly challenging task, particularly when you consider rural areas face an additional cost in travel time to deliver many services.

Local communities must be given the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives, and the Co-operative Party believes that co-operative and mutual models offer important lessons for the delivery of public services. This approach can be effective in our rural communities and should be incentivised.

Recommendation 31

Public services have been in retreat for several decades, but this has accelerated in the last 13 years with austerity driven budget cuts taking health and education services further away from rural and coastal communities. We believe in the principle of subsidiarity and feel that there should be a statutory right for changes to service delivery not to be proceeded with before community consultation is conducted, so that co-operative and mutual models can be considered.

Central and local government should recognise that for the localism agenda to reach its full potential, communities need better advice and practical support, funding and powers.

Though assets of community value are widely

recognised as physical buildings and assets, current legislation should be extended to recognise services as key assets as well, over which communities have a say. This should be backed up by an improved Community Right to Buy Fund.

Transport and bus services

The long-term decline of public transport in rural communities can be traced back to two seismic shocks: the Beeching cuts of the 1960s and the impact of bus deregulation brought about by the 1985 Transport Act. There is now an almost complete reliance on car ownership in many rural communities. Those few who do rely on public transport face tremendous barriers to getting about.

The Government's own figures show that where people rely on public transport *“the average minimum travel time to a hospital was a little over one hour in rural areas, compared with a little over half an hour in urban areas; fewer than half the users living in rural areas have access to places with 5,000 or more jobs within 45 minutes, compared with 91 per cent of users in urban areas.”*³⁰

Research by the County Council Network (CCN) on bus use paints a grim picture of support for bus services and a corresponding decline in use. Between 2009 and 2019, council and central government funding for bus routes declined by £233m – 30% – in the 36 county areas. The number of passenger journeys in counties dropped by 12.1% from 2009 to 2019, double the England average of 6.4%. In 2019, just 16% of England's entire bus journeys were in counties – despite those 36 areas containing half of the country's population.

³¹

The Government should invest in the transformation of rail, bus and active travel services, including reinstating some lost routes, to reduce rural isolation and provide increased work and leisure opportunities. The Welsh Government has invested more than £1.6bn on a series of transport programmes across Wales which will also help to deliver carbon reduction targets.³²

The Government's recent policy of the centralisation

Access to Services

of health services and education facilities has increased pressures on rural communities being able to access services due to significantly longer, more complex and expensive journeys, potentially leading to exclusion from those services.

It surely cannot be right that those choosing post-16 education and living in rural communities are having to make decisions about their future on the availability of very limited bus routes, and in the absence of a statutory concessionary travel scheme, rather than what is best for them.

The transition to electric vehicles also looks challenging for rural areas, with the range and capital expense of owning and maintaining an EV beyond the reach of poorer rural households. All new road vehicles in the UK will be zero emission within the next two decades, and all new heavy goods vehicles in the UK will be zero-emission by 2040.

Neither the market nor the Government has yet delivered the EV charging point infrastructure in rural communities – the County Council Network just last year described a “chasm” between EV charging points in rural and urban areas.³³ And the technology is not yet present to deliver the range most HGVs operate at.

Case Study: Charge My Street

Charge My Street is a community benefit society which installs and operates community EV charge points, raising money through community shares. Their vision is for every home to be within a 5-minute walk of a charge point, giving residents without off-street parking the opportunity to switch to an electric vehicle.

They began in 2018/19 when they successfully installed four electric vehicle charge points in Lancashire and Cumbria in a mix of urban and rural locations. They are working alongside local authorities such as Lancaster City Council, Carlisle City Council, and Durham County Council.

However, there are a number of approaches to delivering transport networks that can help to support rural communities. These include community transport operators, the potential for technology to provide greater opportunities for

genuinely demand-responsive transport, of the growing network of community car shares, “wheels to work” scooter loan and dial-a-ride schemes, and of the important role that local councils continue to do in supporting bus routes and transport solutions for communities.

Case Study: Muncaster Microbus

The Muncaster Microbus was set up in 1996 by local volunteers looking to reconnect the local community. The Muncaster Microbus serves local communities in Bootle, Ravenglass, Waberthwaite, Eskdale, Seascale, Gosforth and Wasdale in West Cumbria. These areas suffer from rural isolation, which makes it difficult for residents without motor vehicles to travel around and access essential services effectively.

The volunteer run scheme continues to grow, with additional vehicles being added to the fleet in recent years. The Director of the Muncaster Microbus stated “this community transport organisation can help close the gap that other transport organisations can’t fill; offering a flexible, door-to-door service for the more rural, isolated communities”.

The increasing number of collaborative, community and co-operative solutions which help join up the patchwork public service provision are often run by volunteers and can be insecure. The funding model for rural bus services needs to be revisited to provide access to long-term funding and support with more connectivity with larger public transport providers.

We propose a new statutory duty on transport operators to integrate timetabling and connectivity. This duty would be on all large organisations which provide public transport provision and should usher in greater co-operation between for-profit providers and community-owned and council-supported provision.

More should be done to encourage rural cycling and improve safety. As well as more cycle routes people living in rural areas could be encouraged to leave their car at home and use more sustainable transport if there was more space for bicycles on bus and train services and more of these services.

As Cycling UK says: “*Being able to ride to the shops*”

but hop on the bus with the bike and a couple of shopping bags for the return journey may be all it takes for someone to leave the car at home and feel cycling is a viable alternative.³⁴

Recommendation 32

The decline in rail and bus routes in rural areas can be traced back to the Beeching cuts in the 1960s and bus deregulation in the 1980s. The Government's policy of bringing back axed Beeching routes has failed with little or no progress made, despite the early hype around the policy. The County Council Network has pointed out the rapid decline in rural bus routes. The benefits of electric powered vehicles are also unlikely to be met in rural settings as the network of charging points is largely urban.

We recommend an urgent reassessment of bus priorities to restore lost routes using alternative co-operative and community transport providers where appropriate. We also favour the reopening of rural rail lines where there is a strong economic and environmental case and where there is scope for improving access and better interconnected services. More incentives should be introduced to stimulate the development of a network of EV charging points, such as those recommended by Charge My Street.

Digital and mobile connectivity

There are gaps in rural areas regarding the quality of provision of digital connectivity. This is a major constraint on the rural economy, on education services and access to health support. Good digital connectivity can help to resolve many of the problems accessing services in very rural communities, for example through telehealth.

The Covid-19 pandemic shone a spotlight on digital poverty, with many people in rural areas unable to access adequate connections, both internet and mobile phone. As well as the impact on business, many young people were unable to continue their studies at home due to a lack of access to necessary equipment or good internet access.

Research by Cebr from Openreach predicts economic gains from the rollout of universal broadband for the rural circular economy, resulting from an increase in home-working and the retention of a younger, skilled workforce. However, Project Gigabit continues to exclude at least 15% of rural premises, and a strategic, proactive approach to infilling the excluded areas is needed.³⁵

A partnership model based on co-operation with a clear plan and affordability could begin to address these gaps in provision.

Recommendation 33

We recommend that co-operative partnership models and community broadband initiatives should be actively supported to achieve improved rural internet connectivity.

Police Services

The Co-operative Party believes that communities are characterised by the people that come together to shape them. This is especially true when exploring policing and community safety policy, where genuine partnership working based on trust and shared values doesn't just involve communities but keeps them safe from harm.

Co-operative approaches to community safety listen to the experiences and concerns of ordinary people - victims, offenders, staff and the communities they come from - and reflect them in policing priorities. Decisions should be devolved beyond town halls and commissioner offices, so that the communities impacted by them have a genuine say.

Public participation in police work has always been vital, but as resources become tighter it is becoming ever more vital. The Government should do more to unlock the hidden wealth of voluntary activity and social networks to contain and prevent crime.

This approach is particularly valuable when looking at rural crime and policing. The NFU report "Combatting Rural Crime" says that there is no co-ordinated response from the Government at all in tackling the problems faced by rural communities – wildlife crime, fly-tipping, sheep worrying and rustling and farm machinery thefts.³⁶

Cuts to the numbers of police officers and the closure of police stations have left people feeling vulnerable. There is a need for fairer funding as feedback from the National Rural Crime Network shows that fixed costs are higher for rural forces and officers have up to a 65% higher workload than their urban counterparts.

Co-ordination with other services can help to combat crime and should be supported. For example, county lines, where vulnerable young people responded well to youth services.

Recommendation 34

Rural crime has increased in recent years and been coupled with the decline in rural policing as police stations have closed. Sheep worrying, rustling, wildlife crime, fly tipping and machinery thefts have become rife. We recommend more investment into tackling wildlife crime and that the spending formula for rural areas needs to take account of the higher fixed costs. Greater co-ordination across services should be encouraged so that youth and education services work better together, particularly to tackle issues like county lines.

Health and social care

Our health and social care system is in urgent need of reform. Across the country, services are at breaking point thanks to chronic underfunding. To deliver the high-quality health and social care services that communities need, significant investment is required.

The delivery of and access to health services in rural areas face particular challenges. Our current health and care system is modelled on urban areas for funding, formulae and policy delivery, leading to rural areas receiving less funding even though it often costs more to deliver comparable services.

Rural areas are less densely populated, have higher numbers of older people with more complex and expensive health and social care needs and it takes longer to access services due to longer travel times to get to a GP or hospital.

According to the Rural Services Network, rural public health and social care funding per head is between 14% and 36% less than that for those living in urban areas depending on the service³⁷.

The Co-operative Party proposes a new model of care, one that uses the principles of co-operation to build on the first-hand knowledge of those who rely on, receive and provide care. It is care recipients, their families and care workers who know how to create a care system that will deliver consistently high-quality care - they should be allowed to lead the care sector. Co-operation that is hard-wired into the system as well as that which emerges from the bottom up within this sector can provide a powerful tonic with the ability to radically benefit those in need. The Co-operative Party believes that wherever possible public services like health and social care should be truly public – delivered in-house.³⁸

This approach is echoed by some of the proposals made by the RSN to improve health services in rural areas.

Regarding access to health services in rural areas the RSN recommends that local Health Partnerships and Trusts should take better account of accessibility and transport availability when drawing up plans to reconfigure acute and emergency services³⁹. Local Health Partnerships should seize opportunities to create locally based multi-disciplinary teams and to develop health hubs in rural town locations. This could reduce the need for many patients to travel to main hospitals.

On social care provision, the Government should implement the findings of the Fair Funding Review to help level up the provision of social care services in rural areas, taking full account of their delivery cost in more sparsely populated areas.⁴⁰

This would also enable improved or more consistent engagement with and the commissioning of low-level support services for vulnerable rural residents, typically delivered by the third sector.

Recommendation 35

The quality, cost and access to social and health care in rural communities are all issues making rural life harder, especially for poorer households. We recommend a different care model – care co-operatives, built on the experience of recipients, carers and providers. A co-operative model would help develop care that is a part of a national service acting alongside the health service. The development of health hubs in rural towns would reduce the reliance on patients travelling long distances to access treatment in main hospitals.

Mental health and isolation

To ensure rural places are fantastic to live in for all people whether young or old, we need to address the lack of opportunities and improve access to transport, education and choice of education establishments, address the lack of employment opportunities and affordable housing, all of which contribute to the higher incidence of isolation, mental health and alcohol issues in many rural communities.

Case Study: Wivey Link

The Wivey Link was originally set up to help combat rural isolation in Somerset. While this is still its prime focus the service is open to all, regardless of age, who have no access to transport be it public or private and to those residents who are chronically sick or disabled. The service is run entirely by volunteers with an employed part-time co-ordinator. The Wivey Link was awarded the Nationwide award for volunteering and has been honoured with the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service.

There are many studies that have shown the importance of being in nature for mental as well as physical health. Building time in nature into our core curriculum could therefore also have impact on the mental health crisis that is being faced by many of our young people. Opening up opportunities of this sort should be linked into ELMs providing incentive and income for farmers and encourage their engagement.

Recommendation 36

We recognise that this is an issue which remoteness can bring into sharp focus particularly where workers like farmers have little contact with a wider community. Villages can be lonely places and mental health and wellbeing can suffer. We recommend that local services give greater thought when planning provision to how the outreach aspect can address these issues.

COMMUNITY ASSETS & COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

“Findings show that over 4,000 community and public spaces are being sold off each year for private use”

Co-operative Party manifesto⁴¹

Communities should play a key role in the preservation and delivery of local assets outside of local authority control. The Localism Act 2011⁴² contains important powers for local communities to do just this and the co-operative movement has had significant success in applying localism powers to protect pubs under threat, for example. However, the Co-operative Party believes the Act needs to be strengthened, as the regulation and timetables can still result in barriers for communities.

In order to help prevent community assets being lost we propose that the idea of an asset lock should be explored as a way to protect the loss of important community facilities.

The Labour Party has recently announced plans for a new Community Right to Buy⁴³, giving local people the opportunity to take control of pubs, historic buildings, and football clubs that come up for sale or fall into disrepair. This will give communities first refusal on valuable assets when they come up for sale, including the right to buy them without competition. They will also have the right to force a sale of land or buildings in a state of significant disrepair.

This will be combined with an improved Community Ownership Fund to ensure communities have access to the finance to make the most of this new right, and to generate income from the assets over which they take charge.

In addition, the Plunkett Foundation's model⁴⁴, providing practical advice, support and training to help communities establish and run successful community businesses with long term survival rates, should be supported and built on.

We propose that any extension of existing Community Asset legislation should also take into account local bus services. This extension could

give communities the right to designate bus routes as Community Assets and have more say in routes being changed or cut.

Many small rural schools, which may not be financially viable, can be supported as community hubs in their villages, which is particularly important in villages that have already lost the local shop and pub for example. Village halls in England have received funding through a government scheme and this could be developed to create more opportunities for communities.

Finally, central and local government should recognise that for the localism agenda to reach its full potential, communities need better advice and practical support, as well these proposed changes.

Recommendation 37

The Commission supports the strengthening of the Localism Act to preserve local communal assets. The Community Right to Buy could usefully provide an opportunity to ensure these assets are not wasted. Combined with an improved community ownership fund would ensure the right has economic clout. We recommend that what is an asset is given a wide description so it can include schools, buses, pubs and local shops.

Community energy

Community energy brings people together in an open, participatory way to own, control and/or lead energy generation or demand reduction. As well as reducing carbon emissions and tackling fuel poverty, community projects aim to reconnect people with where their energy comes from and how it's used within their day to day lives.

Community energy schemes offer significant benefits to the local community and economy, including reinvesting surplus through community grants to support greater action on fuel poverty and carbon reduction.

Community energy schemes are usually characterised by governance structures that are

not-for-profit, protect community assets and based on one member one vote, for example through Community Benefit Societies, Co-operatives and in some cases Community Interest Companies.⁴⁵

The Co-operative Party's Community Energy⁴⁶ policy proposals include a number of proposals to increase community energy schemes which will be of benefit to rural communities. For example, to mandate or encourage an offer of at least 20% Community Share Ownership within all commercial renewable energy projects. This would ensure social benefit by providing an opportunity for communities to take a stake in local renewable energy projects.

Case Study: Bath & West Community Energy

Founded in 2010, Bath & West Community Energy (BWCE) has become one of the largest community energy co-operatives in England and is a successful example of community power in the energy sector. Community energy is collectively-led renewable energy initiatives which seek to generate renewable energy, store energy and reduce energy demand. All projects are community and co-operatively owned – helping to empower local communities to have greater control over their energy generation, usage and storage. This provides communities and local residents with a new relationship to the energy system, providing them with a greater stake in achieving decarbonisation and net zero.

BWCE operates as a community owned business which develops and operates renewable energy projects and energy demands schemes to provide community benefit to residents. BWCE's renewable energy comes from solar panel and hydro installations, with surplus income being distributed by the BWCE's community benefit fund to community projects. BWCE now generates enough energy to meet the demand of 4,500 homes annually and has reduced CO2 emissions by an average of 3,300 tonnes per year.

The introduction of the Feed in Tariff (FIT) in 2010 enabled the business model to become viable, instigating the creation of BWCE. The FIT provided

payments to organisations which generate their own renewable energy, but in recent years this has been reduced and ended for new applicants – making it harder for new community energy organisations. BWCE used the FIT, bank loans and community share offers to rapidly expand its generation capacity, primarily through solar panel installations. Since 2010, BWCE has raised £20m through community financing and the ethical bank Triodos – enabling it to expand into wind turbine power and generate 12.35MW of renewable power. With effective Government support, the BWCE model could become common place across the UK – empowering communities in every region and nation of the UK.

Recommendation 38

We support the Co-operative Party's community energy policy proposals and believe that this maybe an area where town and parish councils can play a role and ensure community ownership or at a minimum a stake in the asset.

HOUSING & OWNERSHIP

“The rural housing crisis is characterised by challenges such as high house prices, low wages, seasonal renting, a high level of second home ownership and an ageing population”

National Housing Federation⁴⁷

We are in the midst of a housing crisis. For years, we have been building fewer and fewer homes while demand continues to increase. The Government's policies on housing have deregulated an already dysfunctional market, putting greater burdens on social landlords while failing to provide them the funding they need. Yet the planning system has a crucial role in ensuring housing development occurs in the right place at the right time and makes a positive contribution to the local area.

A fundamental issue for rural housing is that the market is failing to build enough homes, and in particular failing to build enough of the right homes in the right places, including social housing, and homes which are affordable by local people. In many villages the high number of second homes owned by the wealthy is undermining community structures and forcing out the people who work in these communities as they can no longer afford to live there. The combination of high-cost homes and low rural wages pushes housing out of the reach of many who would otherwise wish to stay in their local community.

Alongside this if we are to counteract more and more small towns and villages turning into commuter dormitories, we need to make sure that there are good opportunities for the people who live in rural communities to find quality work and build successful businesses locally.

The New Homes Bonus has encouraged district councils to favour large building schemes that are less likely to meet local need and can put particular pressure on market towns.

Planning guidance, such as the National Planning Policy Framework⁴⁸, largely discourages provision of affordable housing for residential developments of fewer than 10 homes.

The number of second homes being bought in rural areas appears to have accelerated as a result of

the pandemic, doubtless fuelled by more liberal attitudes by employers to working from home. The rental market for local people has almost disappeared in many places, enabled by short-term holiday lets and the growth of Airbnb. In addition, there continues to be abuse of viability assessments to reduce affordable housing obligations.

The Labour Party has pledged to introduce licensing for holiday lets⁴⁹ in coastal and rural communities to allow genuine holiday lets to be identified while bringing an end to young people being priced out of their own neighbourhoods, only for those homes to then stand empty for months on end.

Neighbourhood Development Plans have also been successful in giving local people greater control over development in their community.

Community-led planning can ensure that local people retain control of the form and design of housing and can make sure that homes are affordable for existing communities. Instead of unsustainable developments by large national groups, this will mean opportunities for smaller, local builders and who are sympathetic about the kind of homes that address local priorities and needs.

A new legal definition of “Community-led Housing” must be established and could cover homes built on Exception Sites to ensure a continued pipeline of sites come forward.

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) have the potential to be one of the very best solutions to the rural housing crisis. The use of Exception Sites is also helpful but is in need of greater protection to ensure that homes built on them are in local use and affordable in perpetuity; where landowners have offered up homes for local people they are reluctant to repeat the exercise if they believe their generosity has been abused, including by the Government's proposed extension of Right to Buy to CLTs where they are managed by housing associations. It is also important that these sites are kept to a size that is sustainable within the community.

The Government should support and encourage rural CLTs, for example, by renewing and extending the Community Housing Fund⁵⁰, and providing rural

training and extra officers to planning authorities in order to mentor communities through the planning process, cutting through non-financial barriers and bureaucratic “red tape”.

In addition, in order to preserve some threatened communities, policies to provide councils with greater powers to disincentivise second homes and disincentivise houses being rented out as short-term lets should be explored in consultation with affected communities.

Case Study: Keswick Community Housing Trust.

Initially, the CLT was formed to develop a project on a piece of land offered by the Vicar of St John's Church, and later to address the local shortage of affordable housing through creating new permanent, sustainable and genuinely affordable housing for local people.

The CLT now has a portfolio of 40 homes across four developments. The first, The Hopes by St Johns Church, has 11 homes, 10 of them affordable homes based on local earnings. The 11th was sold at market value to cross-subsidise the scheme. Banks Court took less than a year, as the CLT turned a disused toilet block they bought for £1 into four affordable rented flats. 22 affordable CLT homes in Calvert Way are part of a larger scheme in partnership with developer Atkinson Construction and Impact Housing Association.

Southey Court created four homes from outbuildings at the rear of a Methodist Church, which opened its doors in August 2021.

Keswick Town Council covers the cost of the group's property management. All affordable homes go to people with local connections who are unable to buy or rent privately at market rates.

Recommendation 39

To encourage lower-income households to be able to afford to buy their home, we should encourage an incoming Labour government to work with local authorities to reintroduce council mortgages set at a lower rate.

Recommendation 40

We suggest that an incoming Labour government should explore providing councils with greater powers to limit the proportions of second homes and limiting the proportion of houses which can be rented out as short-term lets.

Social and affordable housing

The social housing sector has changed significantly. Budget cuts and new obligations have made it harder for local councils to build and invest in social housing – while the need for new council homes has never been greater.

The Government is looking to pass the Social Housing Act⁵¹ which aims to strengthen tenants' rights but it fails to address the lack of social housing development.

Young people in rural areas are struggling now more than at any time over the last ten years to get onto the property ladder, with house prices nearly nine times higher than annual earnings and an estimated 132,000 fewer young homeowners in rural areas now than in 2010.

The Co-operative Party's manifesto explains how co-operatives can play a role in helping to increase the supply of affordable housing, while also creating employment opportunities in the construction industry and stimulating economic growth.⁵² However, we do need to change the definition of 'affordable' in national planning policy so that it is linked to local incomes rather than market rents.

There should be a commitment to develop a co-operative housing strategy, which ensures that a significant proportion of new social and private rental and owner-occupied homes built are developed through co-operative and community-led approaches in order to reshape the market.

Recommendation 41

The post-war development of social housing meant that even rural communities had access to council owned properties, but the Right to Buy scheme has led to almost the complete collapse of social housing in small towns and villages. In many communities, there is very limited opportunity to rent a property other than in the private sector which is often very expensive. In many parts of the country, low-income households have been priced out of both the rental and home ownership markets.

Housing & Ownership

One solution is the development of Community Land Trusts (CLT's) managed by housing associations or housing co-operatives or directly through a community interest group. The principle should be that of 'Community-led Housing' which matches local needs. We recommend an incoming Labour government adopt this model and approach and begins to build back more social housing so that rural communities do not become enclaves of the wealthy and those with access to private capital, who can build or buy.

Private renting

Private renting continues to increase as both homeownership and social renting continue to fall. The greater focus on the sector highlights the growing problems that renters face – from punitive lettings fees and unaffordable rents, to poor quality accommodation and a lack of security.

Many homes in the private rented sector fail to meet Decent Homes Standard and tenants have to put up with cold, damp and draughty homes. The Co-operative Party proposes a new regulatory framework for the private rented which would define minimum standards for privately rented.⁵³

Despite a pledge from the Government that Section 21 will end, tenants can still be evicted for no reason with little notice, leaving them powerless to negotiate a fairer deal on rent increases and afraid to challenge bad practice. Eviction from the private rented sector is the leading cause of homelessness. To give private renters the security they need, there should be open-ended tenancies and an immediate end to Section 21.

The Co-operative Party's policy platform on housing also calls for a National Tenant Voice⁵⁴ – whose role would include evaluation of building regulations, among other government policy, to ensure standards are improved.

Recommendation 42

Rural housing will mean more proactive work by local councils at all levels and increase the need for additional planning officers and support staff. A rural recruitment programme may need to be developed to ensure that councils have access to professional services. Some thought should be given to pooling of resources by smaller authorities.

Additionally, councils will require more enforcement officers to deal with the higher standards expected from private landlords. To oversee these changes a tenant-led rural housing forum, including the National Tenant Voice should be created to ensure standards, safety and security and that rents are fair.

APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Putting communities in control

Recommendation 1

Rural communities are part of the fabric of our country, so future governments need to ensure that they respond to the challenges faced by millions of people living in rural communities.

We believe that there is a strong case for an incoming Labour government to immediately review rural policy and to establish a Standing Commission to monitor departments 'rural proofing' policies cross Government.

Recommendation 2

The Labour Party's commitment to further devolution should include a Community Power Act, building on the Localism Act and giving more control back to communities, and benefiting rural areas through its local, co-operative approach.

The potential for local authorities and parish and town councils to deliver change

Recommendation 3

There should be greater investment in the lowest tier of local governance, with parish and town councils given more powers and a bigger say over the development and management of local services and facilities.

Recommendation 4

Parish and town councils should be able to develop amenities and given capital allocations to enable development where appropriate, they should be given a STOP or CALL IN power to prevent the loss of services and facilities, so that they are consulted before any final decision is made when a service is being withdrawn.

Recommendation 5

The development of super unitary authorities at county level and the emergence of mayoral county councils, parish and town councils are essential if we are to empower people and communities.

In the move towards unitary authorities, many communities have lost any form of representation.

The Labour movement should invest in training and the development of those wishing to become parish and town councillors.

Recommendation 6

Members of the public should be given the opportunity to question elected representatives at all levels on decisions taken in their name.

Strengthening the rural economy

Recommendation 7

Co-operative principles should be at the heart of a diverse rural economy. A commitment to the growth of co-operatives would ensure that businesses are created or grown that are rooted in the local community. To assist this development there should be a national Co-operative Development Agency with development organisations in each region.

Recommendation 8

The local agency should be comprised of people working and developing co-operative businesses in the region. They should be tasked to work with LEPs who should have co-operative models as part of their approach to business development.

Recommendation 9

LEPs and co-operative agencies should have funds to help grow local co-operatives, especially those involved in agroecological and sustainable net zero local enterprises.

Community Wealth Building

Recommendation 10

Community Wealth Building is one of the keys to unlocking the potential of communities where levelling up is critical to social and economic regeneration. Dormant Assets should be used to build up capital funds and channelled towards co-operative enterprises in priority areas.

Appendix 1: Summary of Recommendations

Supporting business and jobs

Recommendation 11

The commission believes that, with SMEs dominating the rural economy, more could be done to support this sector and retain talent in rural communities. Self-employment and micro businesses should be supported and used as a way of stimulating growth in rural economies with an emphasis on sustainable jobs contributing to net zero targets.

Procurement and public sector commissioning

Recommendation 12

Tendering processes for local authorities and public bodies should include an obligation to test the market locally for co-operatives to be on tender lists to provide services.

Recommendation 13

Social care co-operatives and nursery co-operatives have shown what can be achieved. Similarly, agri-businesses run as co-operatives have a track record of success and procurement practices should encourage more to enter the market.

Education and skills

Recommendation 14

With skills and labour shortages an issue it is essential that the needs of the rural economy are matched by skills development providers at schools, colleges and within employment. There needs to be a step change in opportunities for young people. We recommend greater flexibility in the operation of the Apprenticeship Levy and the development of a tailored careers service recognising the special needs of the rural economy through an agricultural advice and training service. This should reflect the major rural economic drivers of farming and hospitality sectors.

Revitalising high streets

Recommendation 15

High Streets are the beating heart of our rural towns and are a key place for communities to meet and access essential services. Many of these services have been stripped away – including banks. We support the Co-operative Party's Access to Banking Standard, which should be overseen by the Financial Conduct Authority.

Town councils in particular should be encouraged to play a role in re-shaping and re-purposing the high street and encourage co-operative solutions to service providers wishing to share premises costs and reduce overheads. Business rates should be reformed and reductions used to further stimulate high street retail.

Coastal towns and the fishing industry

Recommendation 16

Fishing co-operatives have led the way in finding innovative solutions to retaining and growing the fishing industry. In too many small towns and fishing villages fishing has been forced out or become peripheral economically. We support the funding of the Association of Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities and want to see the adoption of quota policies based on social, economic and environmental criteria. More should be done by Government to protect our inshore fishing heritage and promote a UK market.

Sustainable tourism

Recommendation 17

Making tourism more sustainable in environmental and economic terms should inform the development of the visitor economy. The national Co-operative Development Agency should be mobilised to promote worker and social co-operatives working with local councils particularly at town and parish council levels.

Recommendation 18

Everyone should have access to our natural environment but it is important that our national parks are protected.

Worker and social co-operatives could be promoted in the tourism industry to ensure the stronger involvement of local communities, environmental sustainability, and accessibility for everyone (regardless of age, health and economic profile).

A co-operative approach to agriculture

Sustainable agriculture and food justice

Recommendation 19

The history of co-operative farming practices should help the UK lead the way in good practice. Currently just 6% of domestic agricultural output comes from the co-operative sector by comparison

with Spain 45%, France 55% and Holland 68% - the UK requires nature positive co-operatively owned solutions to reinvigorate this sector. We should seek incentives to grow this form of good practice.

Sustainable food production

Recommendation 20

The co-operative movement grew out of the belief that we should all share in access to good quality, affordable food. We recommend that the next Labour government introduce a Fair Food Act incorporating a commitment to zero hunger by 2030. This should be linked to the creation of a ministerial responsibility for tackling food insecurity and a right to food.

Recommendation 21

Intervention through funding, advice and the development of innovation support could unlock the benefits of shared cost savings, joint product marketing and collective bargaining power getting better deals with supermarkets. We would encourage the adoption of the Dutch Model which led to improved bio-diversity and improved nature positive approaches and more cost-effective farming practices.

Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs)

Recommendation 22

The Basic Payment Scheme is being removed without sufficient clarity about its replacement. It is likely to create perverse incentives as a drive for profits becomes more important, encouraging farming practices like those along the River Wye which impact adversely on the environment. Tenant farmers in particular are likely to be adversely affected.

Our enquiry suggests we need to expand ELMs to provide financial and regulatory support for localised processing and distribution facilities. For example, the development of food hubs with abattoirs and communal processes which would bring the added benefit of new employment opportunities. It should also be noted that horticulture is not part of the ELMs scheme.

Recommendation 23

Co-operation and co-operatives should be at the heart of a drive for more sustainable and equitable farming in the UK. The Community Supported

Agriculture (CSA) schemes, Environmental Land Co-operatives (ELC) and Multi-Stakeholder Co-operatives (MSC) are well proven methods of rural co-operation and should be actively promoted by both local and central government departments.

County Farms

Recommendation 24

There should be a moratorium on sales of County Farms and intervention by government and legislative protection of County Farms should be considered. County Farms should be promoted as a training ground for new entrant farmers and growers.

Recommendation 25

Government subsidies should be targeted at encouraging co-operative models in the agri-business sector. Cheap affordable homes tied to agricultural employment should be facilitated through the planning system to prevent agricultural workers being priced out of local housing markets.

Land use

Recommendation 26

Though agriculture's contribution to the national economy was 0.49% and its share of employment was 1.44% in 2020, it accounts for 71% of land use.

There should be fair funding support and fair pricing to agriculture that also gives recognition to farmers as the custodians of nature.

Climate Change and Nature

Recommendation 27

More ambition is needed if we are to succeed in halting environmental destruction and build greater resilience into rural communities struggling with the impact of climate change.

Reaching net zero

Recommendation 28

The document 'A Co-operative Green New Deal' is as much about rural approaches as urban ones. We believe that developing a low carbon technology sector and green industries in rural communities should be an essential part of the national industrial sector. This will require the development of green jobs in rural areas that are more sustainable and given support to secure a fair and just transition.

Energy challenges and fuel poverty

Recommendation 29

Rocketing energy costs, obscene corporate profits amid growing poverty make the case for a form of intervention that brings fairness and environmental best practice together. The development of the Great British Energy company will change the nature of our energy market and should support the creation of new community energy schemes. As part of the transition the Co-operative Party is calling for the creation of a £90m National Community Fund to create 150,000 new community energy owners. This would enable small scale wind turbine construction creating local community owned energy production.

Nature restoration

Recommendation 30

Establish a programme of nature recovery to create more connected landscapes, achieve greater biodiversity, habitat creation and deliver nature-based solutions for food management and carbon sequestration. It is likely that this will require targeted incentives to achieve as part of partnership with farming communities based around the network of co-operatives.

Access to services

Recommendation 31

Public services have been in retreat for several decades, but this has accelerated in the last 13 years with austerity driven budget cuts taking health and education services further away from rural and coastal communities. We believe in the principle of subsidiarity and feel that there should be a statutory right for changes to service delivery not to be proceeded with before community consultation is conducted, so that co-operative and mutual models can be considered.

Central and local government should recognise that for the localism agenda to reach its full potential, communities need better advice and practical support, funding and powers.

Though assets of community value are widely recognised as physical buildings and assets, current legislation should be extended to recognise services as key assets as well, over which communities have a say. This should be backed up by an improved Community Right to Buy Fund.

Transport and bus services

Recommendation 32

The decline in rail and bus routes in rural areas can be traced back to the Beeching cuts in the 1960s and bus deregulation in the 1980s. The government's policy of bringing back axed Beeching routes has failed with little or no progress made, despite the early hype around the policy. The County Council Network has pointed out the rapid decline in rural bus routes. The benefits of electric powered vehicles are also unlikely to be met in rural settings as the network of charging points is largely urban.

We recommend an urgent reassessment of bus priorities to restore lost routes using alternative co-operative and community transport providers where appropriate. We also favour the reopening of rural rail lines where there is a strong economic and environmental case and where there is scope for improving access and better interconnected services. More incentives should be introduced to stimulate the development of a network of EV charging points, such as those recommended by Charge My Street.

Digital and mobile connectivity

Recommendation 33

Co-operative partnership models and community broadband initiatives should be actively supported to achieve improved rural internet connectivity.

Police Services

Recommendation 34

Rural crime has increased in recent years and been coupled with the decline in rural policing as police stations have closed. Sheep worrying, rustling, wildlife crime, fly tipping and machinery thefts have become rife. We recommend more investment into tackling wildlife crime and that the spending formula for rural areas needs to take account of the higher fixed costs. Greater coordination across services should be encouraged so that youth and education services work better together, particularly to tackle issues like county lines.

Health and social care

Recommendation 35

The quality, cost and access to social and health care in rural communities are all issues making

Recommendation 40

An incoming Labour government should explore providing councils with greater powers to limit the proportions of second homes and limiting the proportion of houses which can be rented out as short-term lets.

Social and affordable housing**Recommendation 41**

The post-war development of social housing meant that even rural communities had access to council owned properties, but the right to buy scheme has led to almost the complete collapse of social housing in small towns and villages. In many communities there is very limited opportunity to rent a property other than in the private sector which is often very expensive. In many parts of the country low-income households have been priced out of both the rental and home ownership markets.

One solution is the development of Community Land Trusts (CLT's) managed by housing associations or housing co-operatives or directly through a community interest group. The principle should be that of 'Community-led Housing' which matches local needs. We recommend an incoming Labour Government adopt this model and approach and begins to build back more social housing so that rural communities do not become enclaves of the wealthy and those with access to private capital, who can build or buy.

Private renting**Recommendation 42**

Rural housing will mean more proactive work by local councils at all levels and increase the need for additional planning officers and support staff. A rural recruitment programme may need to be developed to ensure that councils have access to professional services. Some thought should be given to pooling of resources by smaller authorities.

Additionally, councils will require more enforcement officers to deal with the higher standards expected from private landlords. To oversee these changes a tenant-led rural housing forum, including the National Tenant Voice should be created to ensure standards, safety and security and that rents are fair.

rural life harder, especially for poorer households. We recommend a different care model – care co-operatives, built on the experience of recipients, carers and providers. A co-operative model would help develop care that is a part of a national service acting alongside the health service. The development of health hubs in rural towns would reduce the reliance on patients travelling long distances to access treatment in main hospitals.

Mental health and isolation**Recommendation 36**

We recognise that this is an issue which remoteness can bring into sharp focus particularly where workers like farmers have little contact with a wider community. Villages can be lonely places and mental health and wellbeing can suffer. We recommend that local services give greater thought when planning provision to how the outreach aspect can address these issues.

Community assets and community ownership**Recommendation 37**

The commission supports the strengthening of the Localism Act to preserve local communal assets. The Community Right to Buy could usefully provide an opportunity to ensure these assets are not wasted. Combined with an improved community ownership fund would ensure the right has economic clout. We recommend that what is an asset is given a wide description so it can include schools, buses, pubs and local shops.

Community energy**Recommendation 38**

We support the Co-operative Party's community energy policy proposals and believe that this maybe an area where town and parish councils can play a role and ensure community ownership or at a minimum a stake in the asset.

Housing and Planning**Recommendation 39**

To encourage lower-income households to be able to afford to buy their home, we should encourage an incoming Labour government to work with local authorities to reintroduce council mortgages set at a lower rate.

ENDNOTES

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