

# Future Countryside: Reflections and Call to Action

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In June 2023, Future Countryside brought together over 200 rural voices with diverse views but one shared ambition – to ensure that the countryside continues to play a positive part in the lives of the British people. The aim of the event, hosted by Hatfield House, was to create the space for debate, and to develop a shared vision for a modern countryside.

This report by Heather Hancock, who acted as Event Rapporteur, reflects the views and ideas shared on the day, and distils five principles that emerged from the call to action we heard.

# Summary

The Future Countryside conference gathered insight, asks, and offers from attendees across the UK who were united by a deep commitment to our rural places and spaces.

Rural, agricultural, and much environmental policy is devolved from the UK government to the four nations. The experiences and ideas shared throughout the day at Hatfield had value across all four nations, although the contributions were weighted towards the English countryside, and political input was confined to English Ministers and opposition representatives. Attendees from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland explained important differences in their political and institutional arrangements and, as contributions from Welsh attendees revealed, single issues in any of the four nations can overwhelm a more integrated approach to countryside policy.

It was abundantly clear that UK-wide this is a rare moment when both votes in the countryside and votes about the countryside have electoral consequence. Right now, the countryside counts.

The last time rural Britain was so critical to our survival was when it fed the nation during and after the Second World War. Then policy, people, money, and motivation were all oriented towards the existential need for food security.

Today's existential demands have multiplied. Our climate, biodiversity, and water resources all need urgent repair. Carbon must be sequestered. We want green spaces and natural beauty to strengthen and soothe our minds and bodies. We still need feeding - but feeding better. Rural families and communities hope, or fear, for sustainable local futures. After decades lost in the political backwaters, the countryside is back in vogue because it offers solutions for the long term. The UK countryside, already poised, will rise to these challenges with energy, ambition, and determination if once again policy, people, money, and motivation point in the same direction.

These five key policy principles, distilled from the discussion at Future Countryside, are intended help to create that alignment, steer change and uncover the best solutions in our search for a more successful countryside for all:

**1. Bring the countryside closer to home for everyone.**

**2. Plan for nature recovery, farming, and rural economic transition to progress hand in hand.**

**3. Agree clear outcomes for the countryside and empower it to deliver.**

**4. Commit to bespoke rural policies and approaches. Rural proofing has had its day.**

**5. Ensure that people in the countryside can see themselves in its future.**



## **1. Bring the countryside closer to home for everyone.**

Research commissioned for Future Countryside reminded us that millions of people cherish the richness and diversity of our landscapes and natural world. The health and wellbeing benefits of being in green space and getting active outside are now undisputed, and there's ever growing interest in engaging with the natural world and in finding out how our food is produced. The countryside is widely considered one of our greatest national assets. It offers a deep emotional, often spiritual, connection for many.

The great majority of UK citizens are proud of and care about the countryside, regardless of how well they 'understand' it or how often they encounter it for real. We need encountering it for real to become easier, indeed almost unavoidable, for everybody – and for each encounter to be welcoming. There are many kinds of countryside, it mustn't only be thought of as that far off-place that's wild, remote, inaccessible, unfamiliar, and rarely encountered. Bringing the countryside closer to home, wherever home is, is essential.

There are many successful and well-established models to replicate. Over half the population already live within 3 miles of a national nature reserve. The urban fringe, re-positioned as the countryside fringe, can play a bigger part, offering spaces where town and city residents can get into and benefit from nature, green space, market gardens and smallholdings, on and from their doorstep.

The closer the countryside is and the more usual it is to encounter it, then the better understood it becomes. The more that people connect with an everyday countryside, then the more they are likely to appreciate and respect the wider rural environment and the lives it supports. This will help to build confidence and mutual understanding when further afield, in that more distant countryside, in all its awe-inspiring, raw, inaccessible, and sometimes even inhospitable forms. Experiencing remote rural environments, on high days and holidays, can be exciting and enriching. It's part of our national DNA and important to sustain in our shared identity. The income visitors generate underpins livelihoods and services in many localities, especially our protected landscapes. Getting there and getting around is the biggest single constraint to more people enjoying the countryside over the horizon: this also being a major concern for those who live in the countryside, and there is common cause to be made in tackling access challenges.

## **2. Plan for nature recovery, farming, and rural economic transition to progress hand in hand.**

The expectations being placed on our countryside, for planetary and human health, are immense. Taken together, planned and potential changes in land use, farming practices, resource management, and energy generation, amount to a restructuring of the rural economy every bit as significant as the restoration of our environment.

It's in all our interests for the countryside to be economically successful in the way it responds to our changing national expectations. These changes are generating enormous opportunities for innovation, new business, job and wealth creation, and there is no shortage of imaginative, proven, and innovative approaches, many of them captured in the Dimpleby, Glover, and Food, Farming and Countryside Commission reports.

Opportunity on this scale needs to be tackled more deliberately, with farming as a central component of the new rural economy. The first step is to commit to a long-term plan for farming, a plan to secure the supply of quality British food produced to high standards by a resilient and sustainable agricultural sector, and a plan that meets defined national goals for food security, health, international trade, and domestic and global environmental interests. Harmonising such a plan for farming with plans for nature recovery - through landscape and catchment-scale initiatives – will be key.

The success of both will rely on other local services, businesses and skills, delivered in and by sustainable rural communities. Keeping the countryside as a place where people want to and can live, work, and invest, requires policy and fiscal measures to smooth and speed the economic transition. We want the c.100,000 farm enterprises and half a million other businesses in rural England alone to thrive, not merely survive. To realise the full economic potential in rural enterprises, whether agricultural or other businesses, needs action on skills, productivity, and capacity gaps, improved access to risk capital. Policy approaches need to recognise and overcome the constraints of scale and funding gaps have to be closed to address rural market failures, such as connectivity and resilience. An effective planning system is make or break when it comes to the vitality, or sterility, of our future countryside, as is certainty about the intended land-use framework. Risk aversion is to be avoided, as is setting the bar too high.

### **3. Agree clear outcomes for the countryside and empower it to deliver.**

The countryside can deliver at scale, with creativity and ambition, if it knows what's being asked of it. The strategic or policy goals for the countryside should be unambiguous, consistent, and avoid guesswork about which of many competing objectives is the decisive priority. It is for governments to ensure that outcomes are defined, the evidence base shared, and conflicts between national departments and their agencies are resolved upfront, cutting across economic, environmental, agricultural, and social policy silos. Rural stakeholders aren't equipped to reconcile or resolve ambiguities and inconsistencies in what they are asked to achieve.

Being in the best shape to respond to these asks also requires something of countryside interests: to move beyond their differences and the tensions that these have created. During those decades when rural Britain languished, lacking influence and resources hard to come by, rural advocates and activists sometimes felt that the only way to win support for their specific cause was to argue against other rural interests. Binary, crisis-led arguments will be counter-productive given the scale of the task ahead: it's impossible for every cause to 'win' completely and immediately and the arguments between rural interests undermine wider public and political confidence. A mosaic of approaches, progressed through collaboration and a level of compromise, is much more likely to deliver good outcomes, faster, and in doing so create the conditions for greater success in addressing the next tier of priorities, wants and needs.

Building an ever-greater sense of common purpose depends on trust between rural communities, stakeholders, legislators and policy makers on enough investment and enough time to achieve meaningful results and clarity about accountability, roles, and responsibilities. Building this trust and understanding takes sustained leadership and effort.

#### 4. Commit to bespoke rural policies and approaches. Rural proofing has had its day.

Alongside customised rural economic and environmental strategies, social needs in the countryside require a fresh approach. For decades it has been clear that rural health inequalities, educational under-attainment, housing shortages, and failing infrastructure and transport networks, cannot be tackled by retrofitting nationally designed or urban-first policies to rural geography, economies, demographics and scale.

Rural proofing is no longer the answer. Countryside communities need bespoke and flexible approaches. Success lies in understanding the specifics in the geography and culture of rural areas.

Rural policy is likely to be more effective and specific when the detail is designed at the sub-national level. The unitary counties or consortia of district authorities (including National Park Authorities which already operate across district and county council boundaries could play a much more influential role here. There's considerable potential in giving them greater responsibility for developing policy and harnessing the powers, resources, assets, and skills to implement delivery plans. Working at this level is much more likely to get local engagement and then commitment to deliver – it has a critical mass that can't be achieved at the very local level but is close enough to the ground to ensure genuine community involvement. Focusing on this tier can also help to neutralise the tendency towards short-termism and quick wins driven by the electoral cycle. The rural environmental and economic transformation requires long term strategy and investment, confidence, and certainty. Continuity of direction and political leadership is often more secure at the county level and in a high proportion of district authorities.

This model would depend on clear direction from the national government and an enabling framework:

- Framing a comprehensive long-term (>10 years and ideally 25 year) national strategy defining what is wanted from the countryside and for the countryside, across all national departmental policy interests.
- Designing a flexible framework for generating delivery plans at the appropriate level which, taken together, will achieve the outcomes identified in the rural strategy.
- Creating incentives to innovate and develop bespoke approaches including, crucially, overcoming the risk of national departmental boundaries interfering with integrated local and sub-regional solutions.
- Removing policy, fiscal and structural barriers to greater or faster progress.
- Resisting the temptation to get any more involved in delivery.

#### 5. Ensure that people in the countryside can see themselves in its future.

We must ensure that people can continue to make their lives and livelihoods in the countryside. Nature recovery and economic prosperity in the countryside require local expertise to surface and then overcome obstacles to progress that are simply invisible to outside observers. There are different realities when it comes to making things happen in rural locations, outside the ready networks, services, and infrastructure of the urban environment.

Confident rural communities want to believe in a future in which they can secure a home, earn

a good living, and have access to decent services. Any ambition for our future countryside will be fatally undermined if it fails to address with conviction the rural affordable housing crisis, to deliver sustainable rural transport options (including anticipating the impacts of the move to electric vehicles or to deal with underperforming infrastructure, especially but not only digital connectivity).

Not all these issues can be resolved locally, but a lot can be achieved by both requiring and supporting communities to identify and agree on fit-for-place solutions and by investing in techniques which facilitate constructive, informed discussion and decision making. These approaches can also help rural voices to be heard more clearly in the national conversation, working with those whom rural communities trust to speak and act on their behalf.

The direction set for the future countryside must be significantly shaped and owned, and capable of delivery, by those communities. They want to feel proud of and respected for delivering a major positive contribution to the national good.





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