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This green and neglected land – how the National Planning Policy Framework fails to meet the needs of communities

A political map of rural England has traditionally been blue. The shires are where many Tory voters live and, consequently, the areas many of their councillors and MPs represent. At an estimated 20 per cent of the nation's population – and the food basket of England – you might think that government would be interested in the present and future of the countryside. Yet apparently they aren't: this disinterest is fueled by austerity and goes from tip (high strategy) to toe (impacts at ground level).

National Planning Policy Framework

Taking a localist stance, and starting with towns and villages, we can witness a different form of feeling 'blue': the consensus is that a lack of affordable homes is unbalancing many rural communities. This is backed up by IPSOS-Mori's *Property Snakes and Ladders* infographic. It shows that whilst 80 per cent of the public agree there is "a 'housing crisis' in Britain", only 45 percent agree there is a *local* "housing crisis"; and the same amount disagree that "more new homes need to be built in my local area".

Government promises – through its *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF) – that the "purpose of planning is to help achieve sustainable development." Is it really? Up and down the land the true ambition of Conservative policy is more readily apparent – open field for speculative development. This is not remotely about sustainability; this is (hoped-for) building our way out of austerity. Build at any price and ignore affordability. This is why the Department for Communities and Local Government challenged, **and won**, a ruling that a planning policy for affordable housing requirements for small-scale developments was unlawful. What this means for rural communities is that local planning authorities will not be able to require affordable housing contributions for developments of 10 homes or less.

Neighbourhood Plans

Or what about Government's much-vaunted community-generated Neighbourhood Plans? A **parliamentary briefing** reported that the "number of areas having taken the first step in creating a neighbourhood plan by applying for neighbourhood area designation recently passed 1,000". But the **less good news** is that areas "of below average affluence are less likely to enter into the neighbourhood planning process", and that "39 per cent relate to designated neighbourhood areas located in the quarter of 'least deprived' local authorities in England, compared with 12 per

cent in the 'most deprived' quarter". And this is not surprising given that Neighborhood Plans are built on the backs of volunteers – whether parish and town councillors, or willing residents.

As research by the [University of Reading](#) shows, “a majority 72 per cent” found neighbourhood planning “more burdensome” than expected; there are also complaints about it being complicated, bureaucratic and time consuming. And like many local organisations, “Neighbourhood planning is commonly driven forward by a small group of key people upon whom significant burdens can fall”. Therefore such community-based ventures favour places stuffed full with social capital, for example in the form of retired professionals.

The long-term lack of affordable homes in the English countryside threatens the very core of central government’s ambition (in the NPPF) “of creating mixed and balanced communities.” The reverse is true in this dog-eat-dog neoliberal setup where the market rules; the English countryside moves ever closer to a white, middle-class, middle-aged, straight, home for elderly gentfolk.

Rural poverty

Since the 1980s no government has brought down levels of rural poverty. In 2012/13 – according to [official figures](#) – “the percentage of households in rural areas in relative low income was...15 per cent”, including housing costs; and 16 per cent in absolute low income – the identical figure for those of working-age. Five major household surveys undertaken since the 1980s “indicate broadly similar levels of poverty in rural areas”. A 2004 survey of 4,000 households in rural Wales “revealed 25 per cent of households living below the poverty line”.

Farmers have a high rate of suicide (1 per cent of suicides in England and Wales), [according to academics](#). According to researchers at [Bournemouth University](#): “Farmers account for the largest numbers of suicides amongst any single occupational group in the UK, and it is the second most important cause of death in young farmers after accidents.” And in the wider rural population medical [practitioners point to](#) issues of anonymity and confidentiality in terms of mental health issues; stigma; cost of service provision (over large geographic areas), staff recruitment and retention, performing extended professional roles, lack of patient choice, and professional isolation.

The Rural Services Network, for example, point out that rural local authorities are being “unfairly penalised by a shift in government funded spending power away from shire counties to metropolitan areas”. [Rural MPs agreed in 2013](#) that government policy ‘too often fails to take account of the challenges to providing services for people living in rural communities....Rural

communities pay more in council tax, receive less government grant and have access to fewer public services than people in large towns and cities.”

The **BMA** point to the health implications of this: Patients in the countryside are left at a “severe disadvantage” by an NHS funding system that is skewed towards cities; and that as a result “many people live more than an hour’s drive from their nearest hospital.” And if yet more evidence were needed, Defra, according to RSPB and Wildlife Trusts economists, will suffer cuts equal to “57 per cent in real terms over the course of two parliaments” And it was only last year that campaigning charity *Action with Communities in Rural England* galvanized almost 14,000 supporters to sign a **parliamentary petition** to retain funding for their work with rural communities. This poke in the institutional eye forced Defra to confirm that ACRE “will receive over £2 million worth of funding in the coming year”.

All in all, the rural one fifth of the English population are poorly served; current policy justifies DIY solutions in the guise of localism, yet rural people remain disadvantaged and invisible second-class citizens. Government is happy to enable developers to build market housing but this – in turn – encourages more incomers, pushes up prices and pushes out the have-nots and, ironically, further destabilises the very sustainability that policy makers claim is their guiding light.