

The Rt Hon George Eustice MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

20 March 2020

From the chairs of ACRE, Plunkett Foundation, Rural Services Network, Rural Coalition

COVID-19 AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Dear Secretary of State

In these difficult times, we wanted to assure you of our support and that of our members in helping to tackle the challenges we are facing, as a country and as communities, families and individuals.

We recognise that stringent measures have had to be introduced to control the spread of the coronavirus and we welcome the steps that the Government has taken to alleviate some of the adverse impact of these measures. Communities and individuals everywhere are affected, in cities, towns and villages, but we thought it might be helpful to share with you some of the particular impacts on rural communities and where help is needed. We would urge you, as part of your rural affairs brief, to ensure that your colleagues across government take account of the rural dimension in both tackling the virus and in the mitigating measures.

Our concerns are as follows:

- Economically, the impact on the high streets in rural towns will be severe. Many are already at risk, but in particular small, independent retailers will struggle to survive as businesses and risk losing staff. The business rates holiday will not be enough to help them through and many will be reluctant to add to their borrowing.
- The cancellation of festivals and events, such as agricultural shows, food festivals, will impact on business more widely through loss of footfall etc.
- Rural tourism and leisure businesses are often small and dependent on seasonal trade. Although it is predicted that more people will holiday in the UK this year, it is likely that this will tend towards self-catering. Many attractions are having to close. Rural arts and heritage venues are also at risk.
- In addition, the seasonal nature of rural employment and business means that income from tourism, events etc in the spring/summer months is what carries people and businesses through the winter. So the losses this year will have significant longer term implications.
- Working from home is not an option for many rural businesses and workers, especially those connected with the land. How will farmers manage, especially if they contract the virus.

- Many rural workers are self-employed and/or have a range of part-time jobs. They will be especially badly hit by loss of income.
- Socially, as you will appreciate only too well, the problems of social isolation and loneliness in rural areas will increase and will impact on mental health and well-being.
- The advice concerning the self-isolation of the over 70s, whilst understandable, will have a severe impact on rural community organisations. They are the backbone of rural networks and volunteering.
- Many rural elderly live some distance from their families and are dependent on local support. It is essential that statutory and voluntary run care services for the elderly and vulnerable people are maintained.
- The future of village shops and pubs is uncertain. The former might do quite well as people shop more locally. But they will be vulnerable to the risk of getting the virus themselves, potentially cutting off a local lifeline.
- There are signs that suppliers are prioritising larger retailers at the expense of small village shops and other outlets. This must be avoided.
- Village pubs are much more than suppliers of food and drink. They may be the shop, the post office or provide other much-needed services. If they have to close, it will have a severe effect on the village community.
- Community businesses, including many shops and pubs, are run on very low margins and are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in trade. Many are also dependent on voluntary labour.
- The ability of village halls to weather the storm is uncertain. They are already stepping into the breach and providing many services to the community eg drop-off/collection points for shopping and medication. But their regular sources of income are ceasing as social events, clubs, meetings are cancelled. Some are already closing and, without sufficient reserves, may not be able to open again.
- It is important that some additional support is provided to keep village halls afloat. For example, a special revenue grants scheme could be introduced and a loan repayment holiday brought in for those who have loans with the government loan fund administered by ACRE.
- It is also worth bearing in mind that online shopping and delivery from supermarkets is not always possible in rural areas, particularly remoter ones. In your discussions with supermarkets, it would be helpful if they could be flexible to take multiple orders from some locations and deliver to central points.

On the positive side, as you will have seen, rural people and organisations are already rising to meet the needs of their communities. We have many examples of innovative schemes from around the country – by local councils, ACRE Members, community businesses and local authorities – which we would be happy to share with you. However, if such actions are to be more widespread and possibly to last for some months, there needs to be some financial support, both to share the good practice that is already happening and to enable similar schemes to be started. We are aware that the Government is looking at ways to support the voluntary and charity sector and we hope that support for small local schemes in rural areas will form part of that.

In addition to 'rural proofing' the support for business and community action, it is important to bear in mind that many rural local authorities have had in recent years to pare back services and staff. They are now being expected, rightly, to meet the needs of their areas at a very challenging time and they will also need support to do this.

Our intention in raising the issues above is to help you and the Government to have a clearer understanding of the present situation in rural areas and where we think help is needed. We should, of course, be happy to discuss in more detail any of the points raised with you or your colleagues. We will work with you in any way we can to help overcome the current crisis and to ensure that rural communities are properly supported.

We are copying this letter to The Chancellor of the Exchequer and to Lord Gardiner.

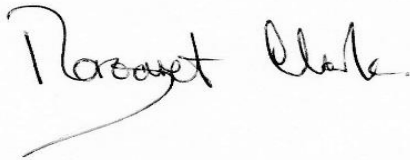
Yours sincerely



Councillor Cecilia Motley, Chair,
Rural Services Network (RSN)



David Emerson, CBE,
Chair, Action with Communities in Rural England
(ACRE)



Margaret Clark CBE,
Chair, Rural Coalition and Chair, Plunkett Foundation

The Rural Services Network membership is 154 local authorities (counties, unitaries, districts and boroughs) from across England and over 85 other public, private and civil society sector organisations, such as fire and rescue authorities, housing associations, bus operators and land-based colleges

Members of the Rural Coalition are: Action with Communities in Rural England, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Country Land and Business Association, Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre, National Association of Local Councils, National Centre for Rural Health and Care, National Farmers Union, National Housing Federation, Plunkett Foundation, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, Royal Town Planning Institute, Rural Services Network, Town and Country Planning Association. The President is Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith, Bishop of St Albans

ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) is the national body for 38 charitable local development agencies that make up the ACRE Network, which reaches 52,000 grassroots contacts and organisations in the 11,000 rural communities across England

The Plunkett Foundation helps rural communities in the UK to take control of the issues affecting them through community ownership. It has over 440 rural community businesses in membership from across the UK.