

Strengthening Rural and Coastal Resilience

Purpose of report

For direction.

Summary

Rural and coastal areas across England and Wales have long grappled with issues of poverty and uneven prosperity. Building on the Board's previous work in this area, this paper asks members to approve the commissioning of external support to develop an evidenced case in favour of greater powers and resources for councils to strengthen rural and coastal resilience.

Recommendation

That members of the People and Places Board agree, subject to their comments, to the commissioning of external research into strengthening rural and coastal resilience.

Action

Officers to proceed with procurement, subject to member direction.

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Strengthening Rural and Coastal Resilience

Background

1. Rural and coastal areas across England and Wales have long grappled with issues of poverty and uneven prosperity, with the contribution of predominantly rural areas to the national economy declining by 1.4 per cent¹ between 2001 and 2018.
2. These issues were recently highlighted in an article published in the Journal of Rural Studies² '*Variegated geographies of austerity and food banking in rural England and Wales*'. This research found evidence of the 'hollowing out' of rural local government highlighting the ways local authority spending power has been cut by the merger of district councils and creation of unitary authorities. For example, the establishment of Dorset Unitary Authority in 2019 amounted to a loss of £21.7 million (-6.59 per cent) in 2019-20 core spending power and the creation of West Suffolk District Council in 2019 amounted to a loss of £3.3 million, or 16.8 per cent.
3. In addition, this research shows that rural authorities are far more likely than their urban counterparts to have closed their Local Welfare Assistance Schemes, with just under one in three (9 of 28) having done so, compared to one in seven urban authorities (16 of 116). It also highlights that higher level sanctions for Job Seekers Allowance claimants (the loss of a person's main or only source of income for 13, 26 or 156 weeks) made up a higher proportion of the total sanctions made in predominantly rural local authorities than they did in urban areas.
4. Crucially, many of these challenges have persisted despite intervention from Whitehall and recent months have only served to further underline the existence of severely disadvantaged communities in both rural and urban areas.
5. A recently completed 'grey literature' review of newspaper articles, select committee response, government documents and speeches by relevant ministers carried out by LGA officers found evidence to suggest Government economic policies have often focused on urban and suburban economies. Consequently, there has been a gap in appropriate policies for rural and coastal areas. Furthermore, the fragility of some rural and coastal areas has been partially 'hidden' by the fact that they are surrounded by relatively affluent areas.
6. The common themes of the literature reviewed focus on poverty and poor infrastructure in rural and coastal areas, particularly regarding transport and digital connectivity. The issue of poor infrastructure relates to a large portion of rural and coastal pressures. For

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² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0743016719308083?via%3Dihub>

example, the literature notes that social isolation increases with an ageing population but is exacerbated by poor transport and digital connectivity. Similarly, food poverty and poor provision of health services are exacerbated by the difficulty in reaching food banks and services in rural areas. The literature also relates poverty, poor infrastructure and health services to drug and suicide issues which are prevalent in coastal communities.

7. The underlying issues emerging from the literature on rural and coastal areas relate to the lack of funding/investment and inappropriate governance. As noted, Government policies have been perceived to be inappropriate for rural areas. For example, the use of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) failed to account for rural economic interests, while Government funding does not sufficiently consider that population sparsity increases costs in rural areas. The consensus that emerged from the literature is that rural and coastal pressures must be acknowledged and a subsequent increase in investment/funding would increase the social and economic resilience of these areas. Many articles also argued that rural areas must not miss out on the next round of devolved powers, so rural areas can decide on the appropriate solutions to these problems.

Issues

8. The Government has committed to 'levelling up' the entire country. What this means in practice is uncertain. However, there is already a sense that the phrase has started to become polarised around the argument that historic patterns of investment and power have largely favoured London and the Greater South-East and that these decisions have disadvantaged urban communities in the north of England.
9. Furthermore, the Government's previous policy for driving place-based growth – Local Industrial Strategies – were often seen to be a poor fit for rural areas, with issues around economic evidence, business representation and the priority attached to the relatively narrow measurement of productivity raised frequently.
10. As a result, there is an opportunity to undertake a piece of work to consider how best to strengthen rural and coastal resilience within the context of national recovery, the UK's transition from the European Union and the long-standing issues outlined above.
11. The People and Places Board has a key responsibility to consider the long-term issues facing rural and coastal areas. Between February 2017 and July 2019, the Board led the Post-Brexit England Commission, which gathered evidence from across non-metropolitan England and proposed a range of freedoms and flexibilities to support councils' role as leaders of place.³

³ <https://www.local.gov.uk/devoforall>

12. Some of the arguments advanced in those reports such as lower levels of productivity in rural areas, shortages in the right mixture of homes, insufficient transport and digital infrastructure and a mismatch between skills provision and employer demand continue to be relevant within the current context and will provide a useful base from which to build on.
13. However, the Post-Brexit England Commission did not specifically explore issues of rural and coastal poverty, advance the case for funding to councils, or undertake an assessment of Government policy to address these issues. The significantly altered context provided by a new Government, EU Transition and the Coronavirus Pandemic also adds weight to the case for considering how these challenges might be addressed in substantially different circumstances.
14. It is therefore proposed that further research is carried out with a specific focus on strengthening rural and coastal resilience and taking full account of the context and previous work in this area. If members are agreed to this course of action it is suggested that the following areas are used to frame the scope and scale of the commission:
 - 14.1. Recognise and respond to the distinct inequalities facing rural areas
 - 14.2. Take account of the spatial and demographic factors that might constrain or enhance future opportunities for rural and coastal recovery and growth
 - 14.3. Quantify the benefits and/or opportunity cost of failing to fully support the future prosperity of rural and coastal areas
 - 14.4. Identify the key interventions for local and national government for building more resilient rural and coastal areas.
 - 14.5. Align any proposals within the context of the Government's commitment to levelling up and the new focus on economic and social resilience.

Next steps

15. The People and Places Board is asked to consider and agree to the proposal to commission external support focused on the development of an evidenced case for strengthening rural and coastal resilience.

Implications for Wales

16. The LGA has worked closely with the Welsh Local Government Association and the associations of the other devolved administrations throughout the coronavirus pandemic and will continue to do so through the process of recovery.

Financial Implications

17. Project costs related to the commissioning of any external support will be met from the board's policy budget.