

Levelling Up Rural and Coastal Communities

Purpose of report

For direction.

Summary

This paper provides an overview of the NFU's "Levelling up rural Britain" report and looks at areas of common interest and overlap with the LGA's "Rural recognition, recovery, resilience and revitalisation" report.

Is this report confidential? Yes No

Recommendation/s

That Members:

1. Hear from Minette Batters, President of the NFU.
2. Discuss how the LGA and NFU can work together on issues relating to levelling up rural areas, particularly following the publication of the Levelling Up White Paper.

Action/s

1. Officers will continue to work with the LGA's public affairs team to lobby Government to implement the recommendations of the "Rural recognition, recovery, resilience and revitalisation" report, and work with the NFU and other stakeholders to align policy positions.

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Background

1. In September 2021, we published the "[Rural recognition, recovery, resilience and revitalisation](#)" report. This report, which was commissioned by the People and Places Board explored the economic challenges facing rural and coastal areas. It looked at levels of deprivation in rural and coastal communities and identified policy interventions government can take to strengthen their recovery and resilience.
2. The report found that although many residents of rural and coastal communities benefit from a high quality of life, with rural areas being typically ranked as less deprived than the national average, there are also distinct challenges faced by these communities and areas. These include a greater proportion of poor-quality housing than the national average, higher suicide rates than the national average, more drug-related deaths in coastal areas and weaker rates of educational attainment than in urban areas.
3. The report also set out the challenges of an ageing population and the £102 billion productivity gap between rural and coastal communities and the national average. Jobs in most rural areas are among the lowest paid, with a quarter of rural workers not earning the living wage, and often unstable as dominant sectors have higher rates of zero-hours contracts and casual working.
4. The NFU's report on "[Levelling up Rural Britain](#)" covers similar terrain. It argues that farming communities have a crucial role to play in developing and implementing the green agenda. It finds that levelling up rural areas could create jobs, unlock green economic growth, showcase Britain on the world stage through increased exports and improve the health and wellbeing of the entire nation.
5. Considering the shared interest in rural levelling up, Minette Batters, as President of the NFU has been invited to speak to the Board about the work of the NFU on levelling up rural and coastal areas, to discuss these two complementary reports and the opportunities for future collaboration.

Issues

6. The NFU Levelling up rural Britain report sets out 10 priorities for levelling up rural Britain, many of which overlap with the findings of the LGA's Rural recognition, recovery, resilience and revitalisation report.
7. The 10 priorities are:

- a. Building a world class British food brand at home and abroad: the NFU report argues that greater promotion of the Red Tractor Assurance scheme and serving more local British food in places like hospitals, schools and the armed forces would have both economic and health benefits, as people would shop locally and be better connected with the raw ingredients of their food. It also makes the case for developing the overseas markets post-Brexit, and calls on the Government to promote the British food brand identity across the world.
- b. Climate smart farming leading the way: this report identifies the opportunities arising from the 2020 Agriculture Act for Britain to become a global leader in sustainable, climate-friendly farming. The NFU supports the Government's approach to the adoption of new technologies and its pro-science agenda.
- c. Opening up rural Britain for business: around 65 per cent of all farm businesses in England also run other enterprises, including local agri-food businesses. The NFU report argues farms should be able to maximise the value of raw ingredients they produce, and that Government needs to create business conditions that make financial commitments in processing plants in rural areas attractive. This would also have the added benefit of creating more employment opportunities for people living in rural Britain.
- d. Green growth for all via countrywide connectivity: the report looks at the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way that many people work, with greater flexibility on work location than was previously the case. However, this is reliant on good quality broadband and mobile phone coverage, and poor connectivity has put rural areas at a disadvantage. The NFU calls for Government to level up rural connectivity through keeping the Shared Rural Network as a priority to be completed by 2025.
- e. A safer, cleaner, greener rural Britain: the NFU argues that rural crime must be treated as a priority issue, and recommends the establishment of a cross-departmental rural crime task force to help to bring together Government departments and agencies, Police and Crime Commissioners, Chief Constables and local authorities.
- f. Enjoying and celebrating the wellbeing benefits of rural Britain: the Covid-19 pandemic has led to many people becoming more connected with the rural areas close to them. The NFU recognises and continues to promote the wellbeing benefits of access to the countryside, but would also like to see the Countryside Code updated so it remains relevant to a 21st century audience, and for farmers' efforts to create, enhance and maintain rights of way to be rewarded as part of a new farm funding scheme.

- g. Making a positive difference through planning reform: this report argues that the current planning system can make the rural economy less sustainable, by preventing farm modernisation, diversification, and home building for farm workers. To level up rural areas, the report instead calls for a sympathetic and symbiotic planning system, and sets out an aspiration for planning reform.
 - h. Inspiring STEM learning through agriculture: NFU Education was established in 2017 as part of a drive to help reconnect children with rural life and develop their understanding of farming. The NFU also has two competitions focussed on STEM learning, which help to bring STEM subjects to life. This report calls on Government to recognise and promote the role that farming can play in teaching STEM subjects and inspiring children.
 - i. Empowering a British workforce: the farming sector has had to quickly flex and adapt to changes in the workforce over the last twelve months. The NFU have worked with Government on schemes such as Pick for Britain and KickStart to create and promote jobs for people in agriculture. To continue to empower the workforce, this report argues for the development of professional skills pathway for the sector, and rural businesses need to be able to attract and retain the workforce. This is reliant on levelling up rural services, including public transport, healthcare, and high-speed internet.
 - j. Rural proofing global Britain: the report argues for 'rural proofing' all primary legislation. Rural areas should be empowered to be part of discussions and decision making, and as decision making becomes more localised it is important that rural areas are able to have their say. This would help to level up rural areas, as it would ensure that decision making – whether local or national – considers the impact of the decision on rural areas, and takes their particular needs and circumstances into account.
8. Many of the arguments and examples set out in the NFU's Levelling Up Rural Britain report resonate with the findings of the LGA's "Rural recognition, recovery, resilience and revitalisation" report.
9. One area of overlap is around the importance of taking action to support rural businesses to recover strongly from the pandemic. The NFU report's focus is on enabling small farm-based businesses to maximise the value of the raw ingredients they produce. The LGA's report argues for support to help these and other nano and micro businesses to recover, including a programme of intensive engagement to improve awareness among nano and micro enterprises of support available, provision of digital devices to help businesses move away from a reliance on cash payments, extension of 'Help to Grow' scheme eligibility, and support for entrepreneurs with a programme of start-up grants and affordable guaranteed loans for new small businesses.

10. The LGA's report also has specific recommendations on how to increase domestic tourism. These include extending and increasing funding available through the Welcome Back Fund to provide local authorities and partners with visitor management capability, and a national marketing campaign encouraging overnight stays outside of the traditional 'honeypot' locations. These recommendations would help to deliver the NFU's aim to support people to enjoy and celebrate the wellbeing benefits of rural Britain in a sustainable way.
11. Both the LGA and the NFU reports recognise that levelling up rural areas is contingent on improving connectivity. This applies to both digital and public transport connectivity. The LGA report calls on Government to improve rural bus services by ensuring that the National Bus Strategy has objectives for rural and coastal provision, with ambitions to better serve communities and their economic needs on a sustainable basis, improve existing routes, restore valuable lost routes and establish new routes where clear gaps exist. It also calls for funding for local authorities to pilot new public transport schemes for sparsely populated areas.
12. The report also sets out recommendations for how to improve digital connectivity, including increasing the Universal Service Obligation download speed from ten to 30 Mbps, and increase USO upload speed from one to ten, targeting 100 per cent superfast coverage by the end of 2023, reviewing the cost cap of £3,400 for Universal Service Obligation and find a mechanism for funding those with costs in excess of this, quickly delivering the Gigabit Broadband Plan, and addressing rural 'not spots' by ensuring at least one 4G network is available across 98 per cent of land mass in England by 2025.
13. The NFU report recognises the need for skills pathways, new job opportunities and collaborative approaches to helping people in rural areas into work. Appendix A below sets out two case studies looking at where councils and other local partners have come together to create schemes which support people living in rural areas into work.

Implications for Wales

14. The Government has committed to levelling up the whole of the UK, and Welsh areas received funding through the Levelling Up Fund. However, economic development in Wales is a matter devolved to the Welsh Government.

Financial Implications

15. Any financial commitments made as part of the actions identified in this report will be met from the Board's existing policy budget.

Next steps

16. Members may wish to discuss with Minette Batters, President of the NFU how the LGA and NFU can work together on issues relating to levelling up rural areas, particularly following the publication of the Levelling Up White Paper.

17. Following the Board, officers will continue to work with the LGA's public affairs team to lobby Government to implement the recommendations of the "Rural recognition, recovery, resilience and revitalisation" report, and work with the NFU and other stakeholders to align policy positions.

Appendix A

North of Tyne – working home partnerships

1. North of Tyne Working Homes is a £4.3m employability project, launched across the [North of Tyne Combined Authority](#) area of Northumberland, Newcastle upon Tyne and North Tyneside. The project is a partnership between social and council housing providers, housing associations, learning providers and local authorities, designed to help those who are not employed into jobs, education or training.
2. The project covers both coastal and rural areas with small communities who have low levels of employment locally, making finding employment difficult, especially for people living in council housing, who have small incomes to initially support travel to work costs. Taking into account such barriers, support is delivered in locations that best meet tenant need, including a range of neighbourhood-based hubs across the area providing on-site services within wider social community networks.
3. The service integrates employment support and tenancy management. It uses employment coaches, housing officers and other support workers to provide a more joined up service to the participant, with the aim of supporting at least 1,650 North of Tyne residents, of whom over 600 are expected to be placed in work, education or training, by its completion in March 2022.

North Devon Biosphere

1. Devon County Council supported the North Devon biosphere with the development and delivery of their successful community renewal fund bid “the Green Biosphere economic development program”. This sees the North Devon biosphere and Devon County Council collaborating with Torridge and West Devon Districts to evaluate and then stimulate nature-based jobs in rural Devon.
2. Devon County Council are leading on the Skills & Wellbeing Pathway element of the project, made up of two key components, natural capital skills analysis, natural capital escalator models. To enable this work to take place Devon have recruited a full-time senior economic development officer for the project.
3. The natural capital skills analysis aims to map all the employment opportunities that could be created in the blue and green economy in the districts of West Devon and Torridge. Once these jobs have been mapped out a skills analysis will take place focusing on what each role will require, what qualifications currently exist and what will need to be created to fill current qualification gaps.
4. From this analysis the project will review which four natural capital sub sectors are most ‘oven ready’. These four sectors will then have skills and employment escalator

models developed. This will include analysis of the funding needed to stimulate the sub sectors to create the skilled jobs found through the natural capital skills analysis, before creating a skills and qualification escalator diagram and four visual diagrams of how people can gain employment in one of the four sub sectors to develop their career.

5. Upon the completion of the work, Devon County Council and the North Devon Biosphere plan to further develop the four employment models using the shared prosperity fund, while using their existing ties with local FE providers and schools to develop proposals for future curriculum developments from primary level through to Foundation Degree. They will also work with Learn Devon, Devon County Councils adult education arm, to deliver skills programming focusing on wellbeing and life skills for adults out of education who would benefit from 'Nature on Prescription'.