

# Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review - Stage 2. England case study



**Agriculture, Environment and Marine**

# Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review Stage 2. International Case Studies

## Case Study: England

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Photo by Mark Shucksmith

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# RESAS

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Rural & Environment Science  
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## List of acronyms

ACRE	Action with Communities in Rural England
CAIRN	Climate Action in Rural North East
CAN	Community Action Northumberland
CLLD	Community led local development
CRC	Commission for Rural Communities
CRE	Centre for Rural Economy
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DETR	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
FTE	Full-time equivalent
LAG	Local Action Group
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale (English: Links between activities (or actions) for the development of rural economy)
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
MAFF	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
NICRE	National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise
NRN	National Rural Network
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
ONS	Office for National Statistics
RAMP	Rural Asset Multiplier Pilot
RCC	Rural Community Council
RDC	Rural Development Commission
RDPE	Rural Development Programme for England
SROI	Social Return on Investment
SRUC	Scotland's Rural College
UK	United Kingdom

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This report is an interim output of the Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review. Further information about the review can be found on the project webpage: [Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review](#).

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Scottish Government or Scottish Ministers.

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## 1. Introduction

This report is an interim output of the Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review. It forms part of Stage 2 of the review, which includes four international case studies on Canada, England, Finland, and Ireland. The case studies have been undertaken by country-based experts and compiled by the project research team which is led by researchers at Scotland's Rural College (SRUC). Learning from this case study will help to inform the findings and recommendations in the final report which will be published in early 2026.

The author of this case study is Professor Mark Shucksmith. Mark is Emeritus Professor of Planning, Newcastle University. His main areas of research include social exclusion in rural areas, rural housing, rural development, wellbeing and rural policy. Mark chaired the Scottish Government's Committee of Inquiry into Crofting (2007-08), served on the Commission for Rural Communities/Countryside Agency (2005-13), and the Affordable Rural Housing Commission (2005-06), and as a Trustee of ACRE (2014-22). He was awarded the honour of OBE in 2009 for services to rural development and to crofting. Further information about Mark's research can be found here: [Staff Profile | School of Architecture, Planning & Landscape | Newcastle University](#)

Further information about the review can be found on the project webpage: [Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review](#).

## 2. England: The rural context

Rural areas, defined as outwith settlements of 10,000 population (ONS 2025), occupy 85% of the land area but contain only 17.7% of England's citizens (9.3 million people)<sup>1</sup>. Population densities and access to services and employment vary considerably, as reflected in the 2021 Rural Urban Classification (ONS 2025). Of England's rural area, 73% is farmland and 10% forestry. Land capability and land uses are diverse, but there is a much higher proportion of high-grade farmland in England (42% Grades 1, 2 and 3a<sup>2</sup>) and a much lower proportion of land in Less Favoured Areas (LFAs, 12%) than in Scotland (84%). Land ownership information is poor, but Shrubsole (2024, 3) states that 1% of the population owns half of England's land. Less than 0.001% of England's land is community owned (ibid, 77).

Rural England has changed substantially in the post-war period, socially, economically and demographically. The rural economy is now globalised and dominated by services – notably public services – with little employment in the primary sector (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [Defra], 2025). Microbusinesses are prevalent and commuting and hybrid working are widespread. In social terms, most rural areas have experienced major change through in-migration of commuters and (pre-)retirees, sometimes characterised as a middle-class colonisation of the countryside (Phillips, 1993). Rural housing is generally unaffordable to people on middle and lower incomes and social housing is scarce (Shucksmith, 2022). The ageing rural population will increasingly challenge health and care service provision (Whitty, 2023). Again, there is diversity, between accessible and remoter areas, between south and north, and between ex-industrial rural areas and those that are more pastoral. Within rural society, poverty is dispersed and hidden amongst apparent prosperity (Shucksmith et al., 2023).

## 3. The national rural legislative, policy and support infrastructure

England has had no explicit rural policy for many years, with successive governments resisting calls for a rural strategy (House of Lords, 2019). In 2000, a Rural White Paper (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions [DETR] and Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food [MAFF], 2000) promised to improve rural services, transport, the rural economy, the countryside, rural towns and villages, and the way the government handled rural policy, but this never came to fruition. Instead, governments pursued 'mainstreaming' as their approach. The objective of mainstreaming is to ensure that people in rural England have access to the same policies and programmes as in urban England. However, the OECD (2011) found that "this has proved challenging to implement" for various reasons including an ineffective governance structure, ineffective rural proofing, and inadequate policies to address rural housing needs and productivity.

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<sup>1</sup> This compares to Scotland where rural areas (defined differently at less than 3,000 population) make up 98% of the landmass and 17% of the population ([Rural Scotland Data Dashboard: Overview - gov.scot](#)).

<sup>2</sup> These Grades refer to excellent, very good and good quality agricultural land. More information on the land classification system in England can be found here: [Provisional Agricultural Land Classification \(ALC\) \(England\) | Natural England Open Data Geoportal](#)

Despite this, rural England has had a support infrastructure for many years, and it is important to understand recent changes in this infrastructure in the context of evolution over a long period of time. From 1909 to 1999, the Development Commission provided support for rural industry and rural community development, initially to increase the amenities of village life, to retain and reskill the younger population and to promote social cohesion (Rogers 1999). Together with the Carnegie UK Trust, it fostered and funded a network of Rural Community Councils (RCCs), village halls, and Women's Institutes, which eventually covered all of rural England (Curry, 2021), still effectively constituting a 'national rural network'.

The initial aims of the Rural Community Councils were (officially) to coordinate voluntary effort for social services in rural areas, with an emphasis on promoting volunteering, active citizenship, social cooperation, and adult education; and (unofficially) to develop self-government at the village level, to democratise power and break the hold of landowners and the church over rural society (Curry, 2021). The Rural Community Councils' activities addressed what were then perceived to be the four main elements of 'the rural problem': rural industry (as agriculture shed labour); lack of leisure opportunities for young people, leading to depopulation; the social organisation of rural areas; and a need for rural adult education. The construction of village halls addressed the last three of these issues. Their activities, staffing and ways of working evolved over the years with the changing context (see Curry 2021 for more details). The movement continued to be funded predominantly from the (Rural) Development Commission until its abolition in 1999.

Today, the [ACRE Network](#) consists of ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) itself and 38 independent Rural Community Councils, covering all the 'shire counties' of England. [ACRE](#) is a national charity speaking up for and supporting rural communities. Its [vision](#) is of rural communities that are thriving, inclusive, economically active and which have the services needed to ensure equity for all residents. It works with ACRE Network members (Rural Community Councils) and other stakeholders to evidence and address need, and to inform and to influence at a national level, speaking on behalf of rural communities across England with a particular focus on disadvantage. ACRE's Board of voluntary directors is elected, some representing Rural Community Councils and others independent. There is a small team of staff. The activities of Rural Community Councils are discussed below. ACRE advocates energetically on behalf of rural communities (notably through the [Rural Coalition](#)) and acts as a critical friend to the UK Government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). The most rural local authorities in England also work together as a special interest group, the [Rural Services Network](#).

There was also a top-down English National Rural Network (NRN) from 2008-2020, run at first by the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) until that was abolished by the UK Coalition Government, and then run by Defra in house. However, while the Network appears not to have been evaluated, it seemingly had little impact and is infrequently mentioned<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> More information about the English National Rural Network can be found online here: [England - ENRD \(European Network for Rural Development\) - European Commission](#)

## 4. Regional and local rural support/policy infrastructure

Box 1 shows a timeline of organisational changes relating to rural development in England from 1909.

### Box 1: Timeline of organisational changes relating to rural development in England

<b>1909-1999</b>	Development Commission, then Rural Development Commission (RDC)
<b>1999-2006</b>	Countryside Agency (merger of RDC with Countryside Commission)
<b>1998-2012</b>	Regional Development Agencies (took over the RDC's regeneration work) – abolished by Coalition Government and functions transferred to LEPs
<b>2006-</b>	Natural England (merger of English Nature with Countryside Agency (landscape, access and recreation elements) and Rural Development Service (environmental and land management functions of Defra, following Haskins Review)
<b>2006-2013</b>	Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) (advisory body on rural economies, rural communities and rural proofing) – abolished by Coalition Government
<b>2011-2024</b>	Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) (local economic development agencies governed by business and local representatives. Funding withdrawn in 2024)
<b>2011-2015</b>	Defra's in-house Rural Communities Policy Unit (established to replace CRC but soon dissolved into Defra's Rural Policy Team)

When the **Countryside Agency** (successor to the Rural Development Commission) was abolished in 2006 (with a much smaller successor organisation – the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) – taking on some of its roles), responsibility for supporting rural development passed to new **Regional Development Agencies** (RDAs). In 2012, these Agencies were themselves abolished to be succeeded by **Local Enterprise Partnerships** (LEPs) which tended to neglect rural areas (House of Lords 2019).

Moreover, from 2010, funding for local authorities was cut sharply under austerity policies leaving little scope for supporting rural development and necessitating centralisation or withdrawal of many public services. Over 10,000 [parish councils](#) survive at civil parish level, with powers including looking after community buildings, planning consultation, street lighting, and allotments, but these bodies vary considerably in their scope and effectiveness.

Fortunately, a strong local network of voluntary and community organisations remains across rural England, though this too is vulnerable to pressures on funding and volunteers. Foremost among these are [38 Rural Community Councils \(RCCs\)](#) and some 10,000 village and community halls. The Rural Community Councils are charitable local development agencies, which lead, support and enable community

initiatives, reaching over 35,000 groups and organisations annually. From running community transport schemes and oil-buying clubs, to assessing housing needs and supporting older people to stay in their homes, the 1,000 staff offer a range of skills, and support the 80,000 volunteers who run England's 10,000 village halls. These are at the heart of rural community life – providing a hub for social activities, classes and services such as post offices, GP surgeries and shops, as well as community led local development (CLLD). Rural Community Councils are very diverse, attuned to the challenges and opportunities of their own county, some large and others small, some now covering urban as well as rural needs<sup>4</sup>, but during the last few years they have worked closely with ACRE to rebuild and re-energise the ACRE network around a shared mission, shared values, trust and mutual respect.

The Rural Community Councils have had to be adaptable and resourceful to survive for 100 years, particularly as government funding has decreased. Funding from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is still crucial in holding the network together and ensuring national coverage<sup>5</sup>. Rural Community Councils draw most of their income from other sources these days, providing services to local councils, health boards and many others. Rural Community Councils also bid for funds from the National Lottery and public tenders, also seeking sponsors. Many would be vulnerable to further reductions or loss of Defra funding.

From 1990-2020, rural England also benefited from funding for community led local development under the European Union's LEADER programme, with **Local Action Groups** (LAGs) established in many areas. At first limited to the most disadvantaged areas of Europe<sup>6</sup>, the LEADER programme eventually covered almost all rural areas of England, with 80 LAGs sharing a budget of 174million euros. Despite the LEADER programme being evaluated positively (see Section 4 below and [Atterton et al., 2020](#)), no successor Community Led Local Development programme was funded in England after EU funding ended: No Local Action Groups therefore are understood to survive in England.

However, Defra's 2025 [rural community funding](#), which includes £33 million through the Rural England Prosperity Fund, does provide support for improving local

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<sup>4</sup> Over their 100 years of evolution, some Rural Community Councils had to merge with other organisations to remain viable (e.g. Councils of Voluntary Service who serve rural and urban areas). Each county's history is different. Curry (2021) sees this adaptability and diversity as key to Rural Community Councils' resilience and sustainability.

<sup>5</sup> Broadly, the Defra grant goes to the Rural Community Councils, who then pay (at their discretion) a membership fee to support ACRE's services to them.

<sup>6</sup> The most disadvantaged areas included areas designed as Objective 1 and Objective 5b. Objective 1 areas were regarded as the least developed rural regions of the European Union where per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was less than 75% of the member state average (Copus, A. and Crabtree, B. (1992) Mapping Economic Fragility: An Assessment of the Objective 5b boundaries in Scotland, *Journal of Rural Studies* 8(3), pp. 309-322, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167\(92\)90008-T](https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(92)90008-T)). Areas were designated as qualifying for Objective 5b funding if they had: below average level of economic development, employment dominated by the agricultural sector, and poor levels of agricultural incomes. Secondary criteria also included: problems of peripherality, depopulation, and a susceptibility to economic pressures in the face of further CAP reforms (Ward, N. and McNicholas, K. (1998) Reconfiguring Rural Development in the UK: Objective 5b and the New Rural Governance, *Journal of Rural Studies* 14(1), pp. 27-39, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0743-0167\(97\)00045-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0743-0167(97)00045-4)).

infrastructure and essential services that benefit rural communities and help rural businesses to expand. In particular, the funding will support the creation of rural business hubs, the development of new facilities or buildings to help businesses diversity, community gardens and greenspaces and improvements to premises used by local volunteering groups. Funding is also available for rural housing enablers, supporting the ACRE network, and for the Rural Community Asset Fund which provides capital funding for the refurbishment and development of community-owned assets, such as village halls or community centres.

## **5. Policy outputs and deliverable outcomes: Evaluation and Monitoring**

There is no evaluation and monitoring of the impact of national policies on rural citizens in England, apart from an annual rural proofing report to Parliament. The introduction of UK government policies must routinely be accompanied by an impact assessment. An official review of rural proofing (Cameron 2016) found that only 11% of such Impact Assessments between 2010-2014 had substantive rural proofing and there was little cross-departmental engagement. Cameron recommended a new approach with Cabinet Office oversight to ensure all departments rural proof their policies and programmes, but this has not materialised. An alternative proposal is for a whole-of-government outcomes-based approach in pursuit of an overarching rural strategy (Shucksmith, 2019; House of Lords, 2019).

In May 2025, the UK Government issued a statement confirming its commitment that all policy decision-making should be rural proofed. While there is no specific rural mission (as one of the missions that set out how the UK Government is bringing about change in the country) but rural areas are affected by each of the five missions and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has established a new Rural Taskforce to lead on rural proofing them and assessing how they might affect outcomes in rural areas<sup>7</sup>.

While there has been no formal monitoring and evaluation of the impact of national policies on rural citizens in the UK beyond annual rural proofing reports<sup>8</sup>, nevertheless, there has been evaluation of both ACRE and of the LEADER programmes.

An evaluation of the annual Defra grant to the ACRE network was undertaken by Ecorys consultants in 2023-24 but this has not been published by Defra. It is understood that this adopted a comprehensive mixed-methods approach, employing a Theory of Change framework. This included in-depth case studies with selected Rural Community Councils, diving into the specifics of how funding is used at the

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<sup>7</sup> For more information, see The Government's approach to rural funding (2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rural-proofing-the-governments-approach-and-priorities/the-governments-approach-to-rural-proofing-2025>

<sup>8</sup> There is information online (from April 2025) about evaluations of the Shared Prosperity Fund which are in process (including some in rural places), but no findings are provided: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-place-based-evaluations>

local level and the resultant impacts. Sub-contractors at the Countryside and Community Research Institute [report](#) that these case studies were vital for testing the grant's delivery against the established Theory of Change; exploring the outcomes facilitated by Defra's funding of the ACRE Network, and the enablers and barriers to effective use of the grant against Defra's programme priorities. It is also understood, from ACRE Board Meeting minutes, that the evaluation conclusions were favourable and supported continuation of this funding.

England's LEADER programmes were included in the national evaluations of the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE), as well as sometimes at Local Action Group level (see for example, Annibal et al., 2013). Thus, the ex-post [evaluation of the Rural Development Programme for England 2007-13](#) (ADAS et al., 2016) drew on scheme data, a survey of beneficiaries, and stakeholder consultations in a mixed-methods approach which is particularly interesting for its use of a Social Return on Investment (SROI) approach. It found that LEADER was effective and efficient with low deadweight (i.e. high additionality<sup>9</sup>) and a high Social Return on Investment of 3:1 (i.e. £3 of social value for each £1 spent), reflecting its broad beneficiary base. There is a large European literature on LEADER evaluation methods, drawn on in the report for Scottish Government by [Atterton et al.](#) (2020).

## 6. Case Study: Northumberland

The county of Northumberland, adjacent to Scotland in the North East region of England, exemplifies how the English support framework can work in practice. Northumberland is the largest and most sparsely populated county council area of England (63 pp/km<sup>2</sup>), including a national park as well as former coalfield towns. Its former district and town councils have been amalgamated over the years to form one unitary Northumberland County Council, which is now itself part of the North East Combined Authority. Some of the former district councils promoted community development, helping establish Community Development Trusts, such as in [Wooler and Amble](#). Constraints imposed on council spending have restricted such support in recent years.

“Severe isolation, ever declining access to services, an increasingly top-heavy age profile, significant low pay and limited employment opportunities present massive issues for many people living in rural Northumberland. The superficial gloss of affluence masks the reality of rural life for significant numbers of people in need.” (Community Action Northumberland Business Plan, 2020-24).

The bedrock of support for rural communities is the Rural Community Council, [Community Action Northumberland](#) (CAN), founded in 1951, and a member of the ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) network. CAN's mission is to help

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<sup>9</sup> Deadweight is a term commonly used in evaluation work which refers to what would have happened anyway in the absence of the intervention being evaluated. An intervention has low deadweight and high additionality if the additional impact of the intervention is significant. More information is available here: [Additionality Guide](#)

and sustain rural communities in Northumberland. It does this by: providing and supporting a 'rural voice' to influence policy, programmes and action; empowering, supporting and developing local communities and organisations; delivering solutions – identifying, developing and managing projects to address needs; and addressing climate change.

CAN has a diverse range of sources of income, totaling £833k in 2024, including £43k from Defra (through ACRE), but with the vast majority coming from contracts, direct service provision, consultancy, projects and grants. Important activities include support for a network of 120 village halls and community buildings across the county; support for parish and town councils; community-led development; and support for communities with housing solutions; innovative [warm hubs](#), rural employment hubs; and health and wellbeing initiatives. Following the successful Climate Action in Rural North East (CAIRN)<sup>9</sup> grant application, CAN's income in 2025 has increased to £950k and its staff complement is now 21 (15.5 FTEs) including its core team and a range of project workers such as rural housing enablers, fuel poverty and energy advisers, climate action staff<sup>10</sup>, and work coaches.

Alongside CAN, LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs) existed in Northumberland prior to Brexit: from 2007-2020 rural Northumberland was fully covered by two Local Action Groups – the Northumberland Uplands Local Action Group and the Northumberland Coast and Lowlands Local Action Group. These Local Action Groups worked energetically to pursue their local development strategies, with many projects and substantial investment. Notably, this enabled small grants for micro-firms which mainstream grant schemes would not have provided, until the UK government directed Local Action Groups to disregard local strategies and focus instead on jobs and growth. While LEADER schemes made a valuable contribution to rural Northumberland, this could have been greater if Local Action Groups had been allowed to continue to pursue locally attuned strategies, offer funding beyond capital grants<sup>11</sup>, and employ more staff to build capacity and so support a broader range of applicants (Shucksmith et al., 2021). While no Local Action Groups remain today, a Community Led Local Development approach informs the [Borderlands Place Programme](#) which supports local communities to pursue the regeneration of small towns in Northumberland, Cumbria, Dumfries and Galloway, and the Scottish Borders.

To mitigate for the loss of the LEADER programme, in 2024 Northumberland County Council launched "[RAMP](#)", the Rural Asset Multiplier Pilot programme. This provides capital grants (minimum £10,000) to rural organisations and businesses based in the rural areas of the county, but does not involve anything equivalent to a LEADER Local Action Group. This programme was extended in 2025 with funding from the North East Combined Authority Investment Fund, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Rural England Prosperity Fund, with the North East Combined Authority as lead authority. RAMP focusses on growing the economy, enhancing the environment, and supporting communities by enabling development and testing of

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<sup>10</sup> Community energy projects; carbon assessments; energy advice for households; training and skills development; inspiring young people. [Climate Action in Rural North East | Promoting Rural Issues | Community Action Northumberland](#)

<sup>11</sup> Capital and revenue funding was available for 2007-13 phase, but capital funding only for most of the 2013-19 phase with 70% directed toward job creation (Shucksmith et al 2021).

new, innovative and locally based approaches to tackling economic, environmental, and community challenges and opportunities in rural Northumberland. There has not yet been a formal evaluation of RAMP as it only launched in 2024 but in time there may be useful learning for future CLLD programmes in Scotland.

## 7. Newcastle University's Centre for Rural Economy

The role of knowledge exchange with Newcastle University's Centre for Rural Economy (CRE), a world leader in rural development research<sup>12</sup>, is also noteworthy. The Centre has always worked closely with rural development practitioners, at one time establishing and supporting a [Northern Rural Network](#) (Atterton and Thompson, 2010) with funding from the Regional Development Agency from 1999-2010. With research council funding from 2020-25 Newcastle University also leads the [National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise](#) (NICRE) which works with stakeholders, from community groups to business support organisations and all levels of government, to find new ways of unlocking potential and supporting thriving rural businesses and communities (Tocco et al. (2025)). See Box 2.

### **Box 2. National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE) Innovation Pillar**

NICRE is progressing a cluster of test-bed innovation projects, co-created with rural businesses, local communities and other stakeholders, including local authorities and civil society. These co-design and trial solutions to locally identified place- or business-based challenges, then share these examples and approaches more widely.

Projects work hand in hand with the existing development efforts of local communities and business organisations. They depend on bringing together university research and expertise, with knowledge from within communities and businesses themselves. As well as in-house research and innovation staff, 'Innovation Associates' are funded to work within rural communities and businesses. The embedded Innovation Associates have proved a valuable approach as intermediary agents in developing more meaningful and trusted relationships and networks with rural businesses and communities, as well as catalysing practical innovations on the ground.

The intention is that these innovation projects will provide test-beds for thinking through approaches that have wider relevance and from which learning can be used elsewhere.

Source: Tocco et al. (2025), pages 29-30.

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<sup>12</sup> Newcastle University was recently ranked first in the world for rural development research and impact. See: [Rural development | Specialty Profiles and Rankings | ScholarGPS](#).

## 8. Future Evolution

The UK Government has committed to be [‘mission-led’](#), with five national missions: economic growth, clean energy, health, reducing crime, and increasing opportunity. A “Taskforce on Delivery of Government Missions in Rural Areas” was recently established by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Ministers, bringing together “a dozen organisations representing rural business interests, communities, public services and academia” (Hammond 2025). Its report will inform a “Rural Mission Delivery Plan developed across government departments in the autumn” (ibid). One possibility is that this may involve a Rural Mission Delivery Board, perhaps chaired jointly by the Cabinet Office and Defra, overseeing the deployment of an outcome-based ‘whole-of-government’ approach.

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