

Hertfordshire's Rural Conference 19 October 2016
The Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith, Lord Bishop of St Albans
Rural England: Workplace or Leisure Park?

Thank you for your welcome and the opportunity to speak to you today.

A farmer was looking after his sheep on the side of a deserted road in a rural part of East Hertfordshire. Suddenly, a brand new Porsche appears and screeches to a halt beside him. The driver, a woman wearing a Chanel suit, Ray-Bans and a Cartier watch, steps out and says to him: "If I can guess how many sheep you have can I have one of them?" The farmer thinks this is rather strange, but looking around at the huge flock spread across acres of fields and thinking it would be impossible to count so many sheep, replies "Okay".

The woman connects a laptop to a mobile phone, scans the field using GPS, opens a database linked to files with logarithms and pivot tables, then prints out a two hundred page report on a high tech mini printer built into the dashboard. She studies the report and says to the farmer: "You have exactly 1,586 sheep".

He replies: "That's correct. You can have the pick of my flock". So the woman packs away her equipment, looks at the flock and picks up one of the animals to put in the car.

As she is about to leave, the farmer stops her and says "If I can guess your profession, will you return the animal to me?" The woman thinks for a moment and then agrees. The farmer says "You are an advisor to Defra". "Amazing!" responds the woman, "You are exactly right! But tell me, how did you deduce that?"

"Well," he says, "You turned up here although nobody invited you. You want to get paid for an answer I already knew, to a question I never asked, and you don't know anything about sheep farming. Now, give me back my sheepdog."

The reason I tell that story is that I'm aware from having studied the list of participants that there are a number of very knowledgeable people here today who know far more about various aspects of rural life and work than I do. So all I can do is to offer an overview and set the scene.

But first, you might find it helpful to know a little about my background and why I have an interest in rural issues. I was born and raised in a tiny hamlet in Wiltshire on the edge of Salisbury Plain. My father's family were farmers and he and my mother met because at one stage they were both working for the Milk Marketing Board. I've had a lifelong

interest in rural issues, having spent much of my life living in rural or semi-rural areas; I am the Church of England's 'lead bishop' on the countryside and agriculture, which means I take a keen interest in our land – that is: land owned and managed by the Church Commissioners, the Pension Boards, the glebe land belonging to each diocese and, of course, our 10,200 rural churchyards, many of which have untended areas to encourage wildlife and conservation.

I am also the 'lead bishop' in the House of Lords on agriculture and the countryside and as part of my national responsibilities I am president of the Rural Coalition – a group of 13 major organisations which are concerned about rural affairs, including many organisations represented here today such as the NFU, the Plunkett Foundation, Rural Services Network, CPRE National Housing Federation etc. As such I have regular meetings with the DEFRA ministers and officials and I am in regular and close contact with the minister in the Lords, Lord Gardiner of Kimble who is himself a farmer. A significant part of our work is rural proofing of all legislation which is a major task as so often, despite the guidelines, much legislation does not really take into account some of the aspect of rural life. I try to use my role in the House of Lords to bang the drum for Hertfordshire and for the countryside among other things.

We are living in challenging times, exacerbated by the uncertainty of Brexit, which is going to affect every part of rural life – but the moment, we don't know exactly what difference it is going to make.

For example, with the end of the Common Agricultural Policy and uncertainty around the UK's future place within the single market, the future of UK farming raises many questions.

What will a future support system for farmers (if anything) look like? What tariffs will be imposed on UK exports? Crucially, what tariffs will be imposed on UK imports that might be produced to much lower (and cheaper) standards than food produced in the UK? This is a particular concern for those who take an interest in the welfare of cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry.

What is going to happen to the many environmental regulations and protections that are enshrined within EU law? What happens to the EU Directives protecting natural habitats, clean water, rare birds and other environmental standards? If some of the clean air regulations are lost how might that impact upon health in the long run? – and so on.

All of these things are up for grabs. Many vested interest are hiring lobbying professionals and most of these debates are going to be opened up again over the coming years.

The title of this talk – Workplace or Leisure Park? - reveals the tension that we find between agriculture and the environment.

Sometimes the dominant narrative in government and the media is of the countryside as a workplace (in which case the focus is on building and supporting the rural economy and small businesses). At other times it thinks of rural England as a leisure park (in which case the concerns focus around environmental protections and the preservation of our beautiful rural landscapes, the opening up of footpaths, tourism and so on).

Of course these are both crucial aspects of rural areas. As a place of leisure, rural England contributes greatly to our national well-being. It's vital that we get more people from urban areas out into the countryside – and particularly school children. The beauty of the countryside is an important part of our national heritage.

But I want to add a third aspect. Rural areas are both workplaces and places for leisure, but even more importantly rural England is first and foremost a home. It is a place of community. I have a particular passion about this, and this includes the role of the church, still to be found at the heart of the vast majority of villages which contributes to community and as part of the spiritual base of healthy relationships.

So I want to give a bit of an overview of some of the obstacles – political and otherwise – that those of us who care about rural communities face in building flourishing, sustainable communities.

So what is needed if we are to build such flourishing, sustainable rural communities? Well the obstacles are many and varied, driven by changing rural demographics, changing technologies and needs, and a changing rural economy. But I think the most pressing political challenges can be broadly captured under three headings:

1. The challenge of delivering housing for all – and especially those on lower incomes.

2. The challenge of delivering services for all – from the very youngest members of the community, who require childcare and schooling, to the very oldest, who may need care and support.
3. The challenge of delivering connectivity for all – whether physical transport links or adequate telecommunications.

Now in the time available I'm not going to go into a huge amount of detail, but I do want to give a brief overview of some of the legislative changes and challenges, from my perspective as a member of the House of Lords, as a Bishop of a diocese with large rural areas, and as President of the Rural Coalition.

1. Housing for all

In many rural areas, particularly in the south of England, the housing situation is close to critical. Because so many rural areas are great places to live in, there has been a steady influx of better-off commuters, retirees and second-home owners. Rural populations are increasing but without the required development of new homes.

The resulting pressures have driven house prices well beyond the reach of many lower and middle-income families. It is estimated that in 90% of rural authorities, the average home costs eight times the average salary.

This problem is compounded by a lack of affordable or social housing provision. Only 1 in 10 rural homes are classed as 'affordable', compared to 1 in 5 in urban areas, and the difficulties associated with planning and development in rural areas mean the situation is unlikely to improve.

Even where development is happening, it tends to focus on creating large, expensive houses at the top end of the market, not homes for local families, or affordable housing for those on lower incomes.

The effect is that those who were born and raised in these rural villages are priced out of the market when it comes to getting their own home or raising their own family.

This goes to the heart of what it means to build sustainable and flourishing rural communities - because a village without homes for local families or those on lower incomes is a village without enough children to keep the local school viable. It's a village without enough local workers to maintain a local care service, a post office, or a local shop. It's a village without the able-bodied volunteers required to build a thriving community church or staff a community-run library.

That is why I, and many of my colleagues in Parliament, have made affordable housing for rural communities a key issue in the last year.

There have been some successes. Improved neighbourhood planning powers should help improve the connection between local developments and local needs.

But a large part of the work of the House of Lords over the last year seems to have been trying to stop the Government from shooting itself in the foot when it comes to rural housing – particularly on issues like rural exception sites.

With restrictions being placed on the ability of local authorities to require affordable housing contributions from small developments, rural exception sites are an increasingly important way that rural communities can secure affordable housing for local people.

But these sites tend to rely on the goodwill of landowners, who generally make land cheaply available on the basis that any development will be affordable for the local community in perpetuity.

Government plans to require Starter Homes on Rural Exception Sites (which could be sold on the open market after five years), or to give tenants on rural exception sites the Right to Buy their home, were clearly not going to encourage landowners to make more land available.

Unsurprisingly, landowners (including the Church of England) don't like to make land available for development at low prices, if someone else will be able to sell those homes on the open market for a huge profit.

Thankfully the Government backed down on the Starter Homes proposals. We're still waiting to see how they will implement Right to Buy.

I say this to illustrate the fact that central Government doesn't always appear to understand the complex web of relationships that underpin flourishing rural communities.

But the example of rural exception sites also illustrates the fact that securing new housing for rural communities (building that sustainable community) requires different stakeholders within the community to come together and work together. It needs community buy-in. Of course, this hasn't always happened in the past. Rural communities have a reputation for rejecting any new developments.

Thankfully this seems to be changing, as some developers become more aware of the need for developments to be sensitively designed to

fit seamlessly into the local community, and as rural villages become more aware of the need for a vibrant, diverse community.

But this needs to continue. Only when the clamour for affordable housing comes from all quarters of the rural community will the Department for Communities and Local Government really start to take notice.

The reality is that the Government has done very little to encourage affordable development within rural communities. Many of the measures it has taken will actually promote open-market development at the expense of affordable housing. There are people within Government who are aware of the problem. We have some real allies within Defra. But they need rural communities to make their voices heard.

2. Services for all

The second challenge that I wanted to highlight is the challenge of delivering the appropriate services for everyone within rural communities – from the youngest to the eldest.

The problem, of course, is that rural services tend to have a much lower footfall than their urban counterparts, and this in turn limits the amount of investment and support that local authorities and companies are willing to provide. Rural services, like libraries, children's services or a post office, can be difficult to justify in a time of severe budget constraints.

Yet these services are vital to the sustainability of rural villages, and not simply because of the need to access particular services. There's also a sense in which shared public spaces and services are the building blocks of a flourishing community. They provide points of contact and improve local networks, helping to combat the isolation that can easily become endemic within rural areas.

- Of course a library is important to a rural area because it provides book loans. But it can also be important as a digital hub. As a place where those with poor digital literacy or poor home broadband connections can receive help getting online.
- Good schools are vital for educating the children of a village, particularly if transport networks are poor. But they are also essential for bringing new families into the area and encouraging existing families to remain in the village.
- Children's services – even just parent and toddler groups – build important community networks; a local post office makes people feel connected to the wider world; a local shop gives residents

flexibility and the ability to be a bit more spontaneous; a local church creates a volunteer network and helps foster a sense of local identity.

In short, if rural residents have to travel to urban areas to access services, then a large aspect of what it means to be a community is lost. The village becomes little more than a place of residence.

Combatting that loss of services will require different approaches depending on the service in question. But one common theme will be a requirement for rural communities themselves to be willing to reimagine how rural service delivery works within their area.

Schools are already having to do that when it comes to partnering and collaborating with other rural schools. Whatever happens with academisation, the future of rural schools is one in which schools work at greater integration, willing to share resources and even staff.

Thankfully that integration should be supported by increased financial resources through the government's long-promised revisions to the national funding formula for schools – which ministers have promised will significantly help struggling rural schools. (Let me mention in passing that the pressure for schools to become academies and enter MAT is highly likely to close some rural schools)

In other areas of service provision there won't be that extra funding and so a lot of the re-imagining of service provision will need to be community-led.

When it comes to rural community services, for example, the future lies in increasing the economies of scope (i.e. reducing cost through diversification of service provision), rather than trying to increase economies of scale. Rural areas need services that are co-designed: the local library integrated with the post office, a local café or shop, a village hall, or indeed the local church, for example.

In fact the idea of integrating local services with the local church is one that is quickly catching on. I know of churches that now house a local post office, a village shop or café, and churches that are home to a community library or digital hub, as well as the more well-known role of the church in providing more charitable activities like foodbanks and debt relief centres.

There is enormous potential, I think, for community organisations to find common cause with their local churches in providing services. Church partnerships can provide a venue, and often a body of willing volunteers.

But we have to be willing to think outside the box – to challenge prevailing orthodoxies.

It's worth saying that when it comes to the role of government in all of this, I think the emphasis lies almost entirely on local government. Central Government might make new funding streams of rural community development available after Brexit, but even that is not entirely clear. When it comes to questions to ministers in Parliament, the response is almost always to leave local provision of services at the discretion of local councils – a perspective that doesn't really appreciate the depth of budget cuts local councils invariably face.

The onus is going to be on parish councils and the like, taking the initiative to redesign rural services for the 21st century. But whether it's regarding schools, a venue for local services, or building a volunteer network, I would hope that you find an ally in the local church.

3. Connectivity for all

The final issue I wanted to raise today was the issue of connectivity. I've already mentioned isolation as one of the great dangers facing rural communities and connectivity is crucial to this.

Because no matter how good your local services, or how vibrant the local community, it is important that people are able to connect to the family and friends that they might have in other parts of the country and be able to run businesses from home, or – and this is particularly important in the counties surrounding London - can work from home one or two days a week, saving time spent in commuting and lessening pollution. For this, two things are increasingly essential.

The first is local transport, and particularly buses. According to the Campaign for Better Transport, local councils have made cuts to bus subsidies to the tune of around £100 million since 2010. Much of those cuts will have hit rural routes, where lower population density tends to result in unprofitable, if absolutely vital, bus routes. And of course, if a route isn't profitable for a bus company, it is likely to be dropped.

The good news is that the Government wants to extend the franchising powers currently enjoyed by London to other parts of the country – a move that would prevent bus companies from focusing only on the most profitable routes.

At the moment there is little sign of these powers being extended to the rural county authorities who most need them – instead they'll be going to the mayors of new city regions. This is something that Parliament is working to rectify, and it will require county-wide authorities to show

government that they have the potential to manage the franchising process. But even if legislation starts with the City Regions, the hope is that these powers will eventually extend to local authorities in rural areas as well.

The second essential aspect of connectivity is in telecommunications – and particularly broadband. Around 1.5 million rural households struggle with an inadequate or non-existent broadband connection.

Without a decent broadband connection, rural communities can find themselves cut off from the rest of the country. The local economy is inhibited as obstacles are stacked against the development of new small businesses, and residents are denied what is an increasingly integral aspect of modern life.

Again, the government has made positive moves in the right direction. Broadband and mobile for rural areas was a recurring theme of the Conservative Party conference, and a 10mbps Universal Service Obligation for broadband has been promised by 2020, with a Digital Economy Bill currently on its way through Parliament.

There is, of course, a lot of uncertainty about exactly what the final USO will look like. How will it work? Will rural communities have to pay? Will it rely on fibre and cable, or will the government look at using mixed technologies to fulfil the USO? Yet the fact that the government recognises the problem, rather than simply trumpeting their 95% coverage, is welcome.

In the interim, wireless technologies open up new potential for remote areas that struggle with an adequate domestic provision. Digital hubs can provide local people with public spaces to access the internet. And here, again, the Church of England is looking at how it can help, with a major project called WiSpire, being trialled in Norfolk – church spires make excellent locations for wireless internet receivers, and conversations with the government about using the spires to spread wireless internet coverage are ongoing.

So in conclusion, rural areas: Work Place or Leisure Park? Well, they need to be both and to develop thriving sustainable communities, of which housing, services and connectivity are some of the main ingredients that are required to build flourishing rural communities. It's not as simple as building a strong rural economy or a beautiful tourist attraction. Rural communities are far more complex. They have unique needs, challenges and concerns that don't feature in urban areas in the same way.

Highlighting the uniqueness of those challenges and correcting them where required, is an essential role of all rural bodies. That includes members of the rural coalition, but it's not limited to them. It means all of us who have an interest and a stake in building flourishing rural communities to get involved – to lobby and to raise awareness.

We have real allies in government, but we need to give them the political capital by bringing issues to their attention and helping them build a case for change.