

## **AI Generated Notes**

### **Rural England Research Event – 29 October 2025**

#### **Summary**

Graham Biggs, Chair of Directors, Rural England opened the meeting and encouraged questions and debate. Prof Martin Phillips, Research Director, Rural England presented the State of Rural Services Report 2025, highlighting significant challenges in access to essential services like healthcare, education, and retail in rural areas, while Dr Natasha Stonebridge, CCRI shared findings on rural electrification challenges in Gloucestershire and community energy adoption patterns. The session concluded with presentations on rural community support systems in Scotland and Wales, including policy reviews and development projects, as well as a discussion of challenges facing Northern Ireland's farming sector and rural policy needs.

#### **Rural Services Access Decline**

Prof Martin Phillips, Research Director, Rural England presented on The State of Rural Services report, covering data up to 2024, which found that while some rural services like convenience stores showed a slight increase post-COVID, there was a decline in lone convenience stores and a concentration of supermarkets in town and fringe locations. Education and welfare services were also disproportionately located in urban areas, with significant travel distances required for rural residents to access schools, childcare, job centres, and other services. Healthcare access was a particular concern, with a 15% reduction in rural GP surgeries between 2013-2024 and longer ambulance response times in rural areas, which was highlighted as a critical issue for life-threatening emergencies. The report highlights the uneven distribution of healthcare facilities in rural England, with over 50% of rural postcodes having no health services provision.

#### **Rural Healthcare and Transport Challenges**

The report also examines transport and communication services, with Martin noting a significant decline in local bus services and varying levels of broadband access across rural areas. The presentation concluded by discussing policy implications, including the continuing decline of rural service provision and the need to consider social consequences of public transport decline, while also touching on the role of community transport and digital divides.

#### **Rural Service Decline and Challenges**

The meeting focused on the state of rural services, with Martin highlighting the decline in services like banks, pharmacies, and public transport in rural areas. Natasha inquired about the impact of community spaces on rural identity, and Martin explained the limitations of the data in addressing such issues. The group discussed potential further research into rural services and the possibility of accessing mapped data at a regional level. Ian shared insights on parish councils providing dementia services, and the conversation touched on the implications of local government reorganization for rural communities. The conversation ended with updates on related policy papers and upcoming reports.

#### **Rural Electrification Challenges and Solutions**

Dr Natasha Stonebridge, CCRI, presented findings from a study on rural electrification challenges in Gloucestershire, which aimed to understand barriers and enablers by engaging sector experts and rural communities. The study identified themes such as a complex landscape, high costs, trust issues, and rural nuances, highlighting the need for mindset change, myth-busting, multi-technology approaches, and incentives for adoption. The rural community focus group emphasized concerns about costs, trust in technology and installers, and the need for tailored solutions that respect rural life and independence.

## **Rural Energy Adoption Challenges**

Natasha shared findings from focus groups on rural energy adoption, highlighting disparities in access to green technologies and the importance of building trust through authentic communication. She noted that while some participants embraced solar panels, others retained wood-burning stoves as backups, driven by practical needs and emotional attachments. The discussion touched on skill shortages in rural areas, with concerns raised about inadequate training for installers and the need for a more nuanced, home-centred approach to green technology adoption. Graham and Michael emphasized the importance of addressing these capacity issues, with Graham sharing a personal anecdote about the limitations of government-promoted training programs.

## **Rural Scotland Policy and Development**

Dr Jane Atterton, SRUC – Scotland's Rural College discussed a project reviewing rural community support systems in Scotland, focusing on community-led local development (CLLD), Scottish Rural Action (SRA), and the Scottish Rural Network (SRN). The project, funded by the Scottish Government, aims to analyse these elements within the context of broader rural policy and community engagement. Key findings include challenges with CLLD funding timelines, the complex role of SRA in building a rural movement, and the need for better data collection on rural initiatives. The discussion highlighted upcoming policy developments, including a new rural delivery plan and national islands plan, while noting the approaching Scottish election in May 2026, which may impact future rural policy direction.

## **Scottish Rural Policy Review Update**

The review, which must submit draft recommendations to the Scottish Government by Friday, aims to evaluate how these programs fit together and with wider public and third sector interventions, while considering their future roles in light of recent changes including COVID-19 and Brexit. The project involves multiple partners including the University of the Highlands and Islands and Ipsos, with the goal of providing transformational recommendations for rural support in Scotland.

## **Rural Development and Women's Empowerment**

Prof Michael Woods, Aberystwyth University discussed the Rural Wales Local Plan and Innovation Partnership, funded by UKRI, which focuses on supporting policy and practice for a wellbeing economy through four themes including regenerative economy and cultural resilience. The project uses thematic groups to facilitate knowledge exchange and identify research needs, with work including responsive policy research projects and community-led action research.

Michael highlighted challenges and opportunities for women in farming, including issues around unpaid labour, networking, and policy support. The project includes initiatives such as innovation labs addressing construction labour shortages, community-led research in areas like local economy dynamics, and the development of a rural data hub. The team is currently launching a call for external projects and conducting surveys on rural resilience, crime, and business, with plans to expand their data visualization tools and continue supporting community-led research through training and funding.

## **Supporting Northern Ireland Farmers**

Aoibheann Walsh from Rural Support presented on their work supporting Northern Ireland farmers, highlighting a 2023 survey that revealed significant concerns about finance, workload, and mental health. The charity offers free business mentoring, counselling, and health campaigns, with services seeing increased demand. The presentation emphasized the unique challenges of Northern Ireland's farming sector, including its small-scale, male-dominated nature and generational farming model. The discussion concluded with reflections on rural policy challenges across the UK, including the need for better recognition of rural needs in government decision-making.

## **Close**

The meeting closed with Kerry Booth, Chief Executive, Rural Services Network giving a brief update on work with the Rural Task Force and Graham thanking speakers and delegates for their time.