LRRG Study: A distinctive rural devolution offer
Submission from the Countryside Alliance

1. ***What is fundamentally different about rural devolution?*** *Which characteristics of rural communities require a different approach from that adopted in urban areas, and where are existing devolution models insufficient?*

The Countryside Alliance sees the primary characteristic of rural communities that leads to their having different requirements in the sphere of devolution, when compared with urban or suburban areas, as the relative sparsity of their populations and, as a result, the fact that a given population will be spread out over a considerably wider geographical area. This presents challenges in the field of service provision, because residents of rural areas on average must travel further to access services while also being burdened with less readily available options for public transport.

Local authorities covering rural areas must therefore grapple with a specific challenge that is less present in urban areas: connecting people with the services they rely on, whether that be by locating services within rural communities or connecting those communities effectively to population centres where they are located.

A secondary characteristic is that the types of activities – professional and recreational – that are commonly undertaken in rural areas differ from those present in urban areas: notable examples that cannot reasonably take place in urban areas include agricultural production at scale, long hikes in nature, deer control and rural pursuits.

Rural communities are far from homogenous. Market towns, isolated villages, coastal communities and agricultural areas can have very different economic, social and infrastructure needs. A successful approach to rural devolution must recognise this diversity rather than treating rural areas as a single category or assuming that the priorities of a regional population centre will necessarily reflect those of its surrounding communities.

Devolution can offer advantages if it grants authority to people with an understanding of these challenges, patterns and activities. If, however, it is implemented on a strictly regional basis, with authority – underpinned by voting majorities – concentrated within population centres with geographically large but sparsely populated rural hinterlands, there is a risk that its benefits may not be realised for rural communities and that this failure to serve them adequately may be masked by an overly optimistic narrative of localism.

2. ***What should a unique rural devolution offer contain?*** *Which specific powers, funding arrangements, flexibilities or institutional mechanisms would make the greatest difference to rural communities?*

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026, which defines and enumerates the various different types of strategic authority, establishes *"rural affairs and coastal communities"* as one of their *"areas of competence"* but is otherwise silent on rural matters.

During its debate in the House of Lords, Baroness Royall of Blaisdon tabled an amendment to introduce a statutory *"duty to consider the needs of rural communities"* by which strategic authorities *"must have regard to the needs of rural communities in relation to land use, the development of land and regeneration, housing, employment, health and wellbeing"*. Unfortunately, that amendment was not moved, but it does point to the sort of institutional

mechanism that may be needed to ensure that rural communities are not overlooked within strategic authority areas.

Alongside this statutory recognition, there should be greater flexibility to tailor policies and funding to the particular circumstances of rural areas. The cost of delivering public services across dispersed populations, the importance of connectivity and the different economic opportunities and pressures facing rural businesses all need to be recognised. Funding arrangements based primarily on population will not necessarily reflect the true cost of delivering services in rural areas.

Another area that bears consideration is the extent to which regulation, and the control of regulation, might reasonably be devolved to rural communities. At present, there is a concern that decisions that primarily affect life in rural areas are being taken by people with an urban focus at the behest of politicians reliant on urban votes. For example, a significant component of many local rural economies is shooting and its associated land management practices, yet central regulators have shown themselves susceptible to political pressure exercised on behalf of predominantly urban animal rights activists to take as prescriptive an approach as possible. It would be a benefit to rural communities for those decisions to be brought closer to the areas and communities they primarily affect.

This principle should extend across the wider rural economy, including agriculture, food production, tourism, land management and rural enterprise. Decisions about planning, infrastructure, environmental regulation and economic development should be informed by an understanding of how rural businesses operate and the contribution they make to local and national prosperity.

Otherwise, we discuss below – in response to questions 4 and 5 – some mechanisms that may be of further assistance in realising benefits and mitigating risks to rural communities arising from devolution.

3. ***How should rural devolution feel different to residents and businesses?*** *What tangible improvements should people experience in their everyday lives, and how can decision-making become more responsive to smaller, dispersed communities?*

Effective rural devolution would be experienced by residents and businesses as an accumulation of more satisfying interactions with the state. This may come in many forms: better and more accessible services; regulation that appreciates and respects the realities of rural life; taxation that takes fair contributions without rendering good businesses unviable; responsive political representation from people who understand the landscape of their communities. To achieve this requires that decisions are taken by people who know rural circumstances and are sympathetic to those living and working under them.

Rural devolution should also enable communities to identify and develop their own economic opportunities. Rural areas make a significant contribution to national prosperity through food production, tourism, energy, environmental management and a diverse range of businesses. Local decision-making should help unlock this potential, ensuring that economic development reflects the strengths and opportunities of individual places rather than applying a standard regional approach.

Devolution is central to the current government's agenda and is being actively pursued. Rural communities need to understand how they can contribute positively to that reality, and to feel

involved in its design so that they can be confident the outcomes will leave them included, not overlooked.

Fundamentally, rural communities want to be able to communicate what they are contributing to the country – to its economy and wider society – instead of having constantly to argue for what they need, and they want to join in working towards the success of devolved government, rather than acting as passive recipients of decisions made elsewhere. An effective rural devolution settlement could be enormously beneficial in achieving that.

4. ***How can rural voices be protected and strengthened through devolution?*** *What mechanisms would ensure that rural communities are not overlooked within larger strategic authorities, particularly where population-based representation favours urban centres? How should rural representation and funding be protected in mixed urban–rural areas, including where an urban hub sits alongside several rural authorities?*

The question alludes to our principal concern about the devolution agenda as it appears to be being pursued by the central government at present.

Aside from the considerations it suggests in relation to strategic authorities, there is a similar issue with the current Home Office proposals for police reform, as set out in its January White Paper. While we are pleased to have had the opportunity to make representations to Lord Hogan-Howe's independent review of police force structures, we continue to share concerns raised by the Police Federation and others that the operational demands of major urban centres risk motivating a redeployment of resources and expertise away from rural areas and the policing of characteristically rural crimes.

Representation must be meaningful and embedded within the decision-making structures of strategic authorities. Rural communities should not only be consulted when decisions are being developed, but should have a recognised role in shaping priorities and scrutinising outcomes. This is particularly important where a large urban centre has a disproportionate influence over the political and economic direction of an authority.

There are several possible strategies for addressing these matters, and a complete solution may require them to be used in combination. These include:

- More devolution, down to smaller, more local areas. In deploying such a strategy, policymakers would need to keep in mind the risk of devolution fuelling accusations that they have created a 'postcode lottery' in which differing local priorities give rise to varying levels of service and regulatory activity.
- Ringfencing funding for expenditure within rural areas or on services adapted to meet rural needs within an authority area.
- A statutory rural proofing duty imposed upon devolved authorities, including police forces as well as strategic authorities, along the lines currently under consideration by the Welsh Government and/or according to our own proposal as set out below. This would require rural needs and opportunities to be formally examined and catalogued during the design phase of a policy or service.

These arrangements should be supported by transparent reporting on how funding is distributed and how decisions are forecast to affect rural communities. Strategic authorities should be able to demonstrate that rural needs and opportunities have been considered, and explain how

competing priorities have been balanced. Without this accountability, rural proofing risks becoming a procedural exercise rather than a meaningful influence on policy.

5. ***What can the Government do now?*** *Which changes could be delivered through existing policy, guidance, funding settlements or devolution agreements, and which would require longer-term legislative or structural reform? Which practical lessons from Scotland and Wales, including concerns raised about centralised decision-making within devolved nations, should inform the design of new rural devolution arrangements?*

The Countryside Alliance has proposed a suite of three policies that we believe would be helpful in reconnecting government with the countryside. In brief, these are a Rural Community Impact Assessment process amounting to a rural proofing duty as outlined above, an annual 'state of the countryside' report with an accompanying debate in Parliament, and a Countryside Champion with the authority and mandate to drive this activity within government and act as liaison with rural communities.

These proposals focus on the central government, but they are also readily replicable within regional strategic authorities. A regional Countryside Champion could sit at the strategic level, where relevant perhaps as a deputy mayor; an annual 'state of the countryside' report could be produced for each authority area, and considered through Local Scrutiny Committees; and rural proofing could be achieved by restoring to the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 the amendment proposed by Baroness Royall of Blaisdon to introduce a statutory duty to consider the needs of rural communities as discussed above, or by other means.

Experience elsewhere in the UK demonstrates the importance of ensuring that devolution does not simply result in the centralisation of decision-making at a different level of government. The transfer of powers from Westminster must be accompanied by meaningful accountability to local communities and an understanding of the differing needs of individual places. Rural communities should not find themselves further removed from decision-making as a result of devolution.

Primarily, the government needs to set out how it intends to reflect rural needs in its design of devolution settlements, how it expects the new arrangements to benefit rural communities, and how it will mitigate the risks we have identified of political attention and funding being drawn away from rural areas to urban centres within regions. This must also include a vision of what the continuing role of Westminster and the central government is intended to be, and how rural communities will be able to maintain relationships with them.

Ultimately, successful rural devolution should empower communities to shape their own futures, recognise the contribution they make to national prosperity and ensure that the benefits of devolution are felt across the whole of an authority area, not just its largest population centres.