**Call for Evidence: Rural Economy**

*Stoke St Mary Parish Council*

Responses to NALC re House of Lords Select Committee Consultation Questions

# Introduction

A Meeting of Stoke St Mary Parish Council was held on Monday 13th August at 7.30pm in the Village Hall to discuss the responses to the House of Lords Select Committee Consultation regarding the UK Rural Economy. This review was requested by NALC

**Councillors Present: In Attendance:**

Nigel Wright – Chairman 1 Parishioner (Sarah Baddeley)

Michael Baddeley

Michael Farrell

Vic Freir

Rob Hossell

In total, there were 15 questions in the Consultation Document and responses to each these are provided below.

***General Issues***

# What do you understand by the “rural economy”? How has it changed over recent years, and what has been the impact of these changes?

Historically, rural area populations were, almost entirely, directly employed in the farming/ agriculture sector. This began to change in the first half of the 20th Century, when farm service companies (e.g. servicing and supplying farm machinery and related services) and builders expanded their presence from the towns to the rural areas.

From the mid-20th century (post World War 2) to the current day, there has been a significant shift. Wealthy people and retirees began to move to the countryside, building and purchasing houses, with some setting up their own businesses, in areas such as retail, provision of farm vehicles and machinery and related services. This trend has continued into the 21st century.

The impact of this has been significant, with more prestigious houses being constructed for the city migrants, often to the detriment of more affordable housing for the original indigenous residents, since developers are often allowed to build a minimum (if any) of affordable houses, with preference for the high margin more expensive houses.

With the introduction of the internet, the acceleration in the trend has increased exponentially, with many former city dwellers moving to the country and setting up businesses from home. (This despite areas with poor internet services – see section 5 below).

According to 2016 figures from the World Bank, almost 20% of Britons live in rural areas. However, the total employment in agriculture is only 1.13% of total UK employment. It is, therefore, not surprising that the “traditional” rural economy is overlooked in favour of the wealthier population that has moved from the cities.

This problem is further exacerbated by the “Short-term nature” of UK politics, from both a national and local standpoint. With 5 year terms of office, policies tend to be both short term and also favour the majority of the local population, who are not involved in, or employed by the rural economy and businesses. The only way to reverse this trend is to make rural policy apolitical with a much longer time span.

# Could you give examples of notable success stories and good practice in the rural economy? How might rural successes be replicated and better promoted?

Stoke St Mary is part of Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC). Unfortunately, TDBC are an example of generally poor practice for the rural economy. Conversely, nearby Bridgwater, which is part of Sedgemoor District Council, have had notable successes in developing their rural economy. These are discussed below:

## Sedgemoor

Sedgemoor District Council has attracted businesses to towns, such as Bridgwater. Significant large scale businesses have been attracted to the town and neighbouring areas, but, crucially, these have been located within the outskirts of the town, with good accessibility to the M5 junction 24. There has also been investment in the town with the recent building of a new theatre and has attracted retailers and other businesses by making business rates affordable.

Despite this, the council has not forgotten the rural community and has moved the cattle market to a location that is readily accessible to farmers transporting livestock to the town.

The above has been successful and enabled Bridgwater to become a thriving market town.

## Taunton Deane

Taunton has failed where Sedgmoor has succeeded. A large area of town (Firepool) was cleared several years ago, to build a new modern shopping area. However, there was no demand and the site is now a “wasteland”. The town itself has forced most small private retailers out, partly due to high business rates, and the centre consists primarily of charity shops, coffee shops and a few department stores. (Large supermarkets are mostly located around the outskirts of the town). With the recent national demise, some still pending, of several major high street stores, the degradation of the town centre is likely to continue without any plans or remedies in sight.

Instead, the Borough Council is channelling its energy in the development of a new Business Park at Junction 25. The benefit of this to the local community is, at best, questionable and will make access to the town centre from the south even more arduous and difficult.

# How do you see the future of the rural economy? Where is the greatest potential for growth, and what might be the impact of technological and other changes?

The impact of Brexit was not discussed during the compilation of this response, but there is no doubt that there will be some significant effects on the rural economy (particularly in agriculture), both positive and negative.

There needs to be a continued, and even increased, development of business opportunities within Taunton Deane. This also requires affordable properties for both renting and purchasing, to be available with reliable infrastructure, including internet and telecoms. There also needs to be other services, such as shops, medical and dental services etc. in any new housing development (rental or for purchase). This has been noticeably lacking in Taunton Deane for recent housing developments. Enforced liaison with the Community Council for Somerset must exist before developments are approved.

What is NOT needed is the selling off of good quality farm land to “high end” housing developers. This will restrict/ reduce growth and simply attract more retired, wealthy residents. These higher end houses, where justified, should be constructed on less good quality land.

***Infrastructure and services***

# How can access to transport be improved in rural areas?

In the Parish of Stoke St Mary, the only public transport consists of a community bus that runs to Taunton and back for 2 days per week. This is not untypical of the area. This bus can be pre-booked and in often fully subscribed well in advance.

Voluntary “car pools” have been tried but with mixed success. Elderly residents appeared not to be keen to utilise the service.

The reality is that the elderly and otherwise immobile residents either have to move closer to towns (often unaffordable to them) or ask neighbours to do shopping, take them to doctors etc. which they are not keen to do.

School buses in the area are a mystery. Within Stoke St Mary, there is only one school bus for one specific school. This school is less than 3 miles from the village but the roads around the village are deemed too dangerous without a school bus. However, the school in the neighbouring village (Thurlbear) is not allowed to run buses, so all pupils are driven by parents. This is on roads that are entirely unsuitable for the increased travel in these peak times.

# What barriers to growth are created by poor digital connectivity? How can connectivity be improved across the board?

While it is recognised that providing reliable and high speed internet in remote areas is more expensive and challenging, the very slow speeds in some areas have forced businesses to either cease trading or prevented them from starting! In other countries, even large remote areas seem to be provide with good quality connectivity (in terms of both speed and capacity! In Stoke St Mary, the centre of the village now has a reasonably high speed service, but this is not replicated in the outlying areas. This situation is duplicated throughout the Borough. The project to install these services is already 18 months behind schedule!

Internet provision for the local school is essential for the children’s education. There was a microwave connection provided for a period, but this was shut down by Somerset County Council, presumably due to costs.

New housing developments (particularly higher end property developments) appear to get priority with regards to quality internet services being installed.

# What can be done to improve and maintain provision for essential services such as healthcare, education and banking in rural areas?

There is no specific healthcare (including dental) provision in small communities, such as Stoke St Mary. Accessing such services requires travel to surgeries within other, more populated communities, which is a problem for the elderly and immobile, who are often those most in need.

Possible solutions could be mobile surgeries that visit rural locations or electronic communications, such as Skype or Facetime. However, the internet speeds (see 5 above) make this sometimes impractical and those, most in need, are not comfortable or even capable with such communication methods.

There is a primary school locally (see also 4 above), but secondary schools require pupils to travel on a daily basis (or board). As mentioned above, one of the major issues is internet connectivity.

There is no banking facility in the rural areas. Mobile banking is used by many, but again, those that prefer face to face banking services are the elderly, who have to travel to Taunton to visit their bank. A mobile bank (say fortnightly) would undoubtedly help these residents.

# What can be done to support local shops, community pubs and other rural amenities at risk of closure?

Many villages, including Stoke St Mary, has no local shop and has not for many years. TDBC Business Rates are high and prohibitive to the setting up (and survival) of local shops (and any other businesses except those that can be performed from within the home). As discussed in section 6 above, this is a particular issue for elderly and immobile residents, who have to rely on neighbours/ friends to either do the shopping for them, or drive them to the shops. While online shopping is an option, many elderly residents are not comfortable (or capable) doing this. (This includes being nervous of having strangers calling at the door – see section 14 regarding policing in rural areas).

Community shops have been successful in some areas, but the population of Stoke St Mary is too small to make it successful. In recent years, several community shops within TDBC have closed down. Once this happens, they do not return.

The pub in Stoke St Mary (The Half Moon) has had 7 different tenants in the last 7 years. The pub is owned by an investment company (Enterprise Inns) who charge high rental rates and also compels the tenants to buy beer and spirits from them with tiny margins. The only way that the tenant can make money is through serving food, but to attract sufficient numbers to make this worthwhile is very difficult, when outside the major towns. Even when the tenant does make a success of this, the owner reviews their accounts and increases the rent.

A community pub requires a critical mass of residents prepared to spend time running it. In such a small community, such as Stoke St Mary, with an ageing population, finding sufficient numbers to do this is almost impossible.

***Business, employment, skills and demography***

# How can rural businesses be helped to thrive, and how can new industries and investment be supported? How might labour and skills shortages be overcome?

Setting up a rural business, other than a small business within one’s own home, is expensive, primarily due to high Business rates. A reduction in these rates would at least give start-up businesses a chance. Furthermore, any employees, either labour or semi-skilled, cannot afford to live in most rural communities, due to lack of rental accommodation, and therefore need to be self-mobile, as there Is no public transport! The only way to encourage local rural businesses would be to reduce (or even waive) Business rates and provide some form of public transport, even if only in peak hours at the start and end of each weekday.

These requirements would need to be funded by Local Government, but from a cynical viewpoint, there are not enough votes in such rural areas to influence and encourage such investment.

# How can deprivation and inequality in rural areas be tackled?

Deprivation and inequality is the result of a market economy, coupled with local government policies, which are tailored to the wealthier constituents and those in the urban areas, which is where most voters reside.

Minimum standards of rental housing, both private and council provided, with capped rents and longer term tenancies would assist in this regard. Assured tenancies is a specific policy that could be beneficial.

# How can more younger people be encouraged to stay in or return to rural areas and contribute to their communities?

Many rural communities, such as Stoke St Mary, have very few “younger” residents. This is due to the lack of affordable/ social housing, the lack of available jobs (see 8 above) and the absence of public transport to enable them to seek entertainment in nearby towns. Without significant investment and a coherent policy (preferably national rather than local), the status quo is unlikely to change.

# What can be done to address the challenges associated with an ageing rural population, such as social isolation and social care provision? What opportunities are there for the older retired population to help support the rural economy?

Parish Councils and other volunteers do attempt to put on events that appeal to the more elderly residents in rural locations. However, finding people, who are prepared to commit their time, is becoming more difficult.

Funding for events that are affordable is challenging and, hence, such events tend to be restricted to events such as afternoon teas in the Village Hall or occasional events at the local public house. However, due to the high turnover of tenants at the pub (see section 7 above) even these have become fewer. One annual event is organised by a local resident on his land, which provides a barbecue and live bands, but this is not particularly attractive to the older residents and is a private event.

As far as social care provision is concerned, this is provided by Borough and County councils and dictated by National Government.

Even Parish Councils often struggle to “persuade” volunteers to join the council and, hence, the burden of arranging and organising events becomes even less practical. Some parishes in the county have actually disbanded their parish councils and are, therefore, run by the Borough Council. The Borough Council has little (or no) interest, or money (?), in organising events, or even transport, in local parishes for the elderly communities and, hence, the situation is more likely to worsen, rather than improve, in the future.

***Rural housing and planning***

# How can the affordability of rural housing be improved? What are the other challenges associated with rural housing and how can these be addressed?

Press reports in the past year have suggested that construction of affordable housing nationally has reduced dramatically. That is reflected within Taunton Deane, where many developments of “higher end” housing, as well as Business Parks and other “Pet” council projects have gone ahead with little affordable housing planned. Even where there is provision for affordable housing within development plans, this is often left to the end of the development or even ignored, at least for a period of time.

Local authorities should insist that developers agree to build a minimum of 25% of affordable housing at any new development site and these should be completed before the main development. This is already done in some (mostly non-rural) locations.

Brownfield sites should be utilised as a priority for new rural housing, both high end and affordable properties. Greenfield sites should only be used where authorities agree that there are no viable alternatives.

Until now, much of the farmland and housing in the Parish of Stoke St Mary has been on land owned by The Crown Estate. Properties were rented at affordable rates to tenants and this has had a beneficial effect on the availability of housing within the parish. However, this land has recently been sold to Investment Companies (e.g. Pension Funds) and to developers. While existing tenants have been able to make an arrangement with Crown Estate to extend their tenancies for a maximum of 7 years, the impact will be that there will be even fewer affordable houses in the area and existing tenants may find they are forced to move on after 7 years. Since many of these are more elderly, it is possible that they will be forced to move on and/or be unable to pay the market rents in the area. TDBC do not appear to have any policy of how this will be addressed.

There may be some new housing built by the new developers, but the likelihood is that this will be predominantly higher specification and larger houses, which will be unaffordable to existing Crown Estate tenants.

# How have recent planning policy reforms affected rural housing and the wider rural economy? What changes, if any, are needed to planning rules?

The relaxation of rules, particularly in recent years, has caused most of the current issues, with less social housing constructed, as a result.

Planning rules should be rigorously enforced, including the identification and plans the required infrastructure, for any new developments before applications are approved.

***Government policy, devolution and local government***

# Do the Government and other public bodies pay sufficient attention to the rural economy and if not, why not? What might be done to ensure that Government and other public bodies hear and act on rural voices?

The reality is that Government, in particular, and other public bodies in general, pay scant attention to the rural economy. This is primarily due to the fact that voters in these communities have little impact on elections, as there are proportionately fewer voters in these areas.

One potential improvement would be to have a Ministerial appointment that oversees Rural Affairs, with all Local Authorities (County, Borough and Parish) answerable to this department. DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) tends to concentrate purely on farming rather than Rural Communities as a whole.

The other problem is the number of layers within Government, namely:

* National Government
* County Councils
* Borough Councils
* Parish Councils

Each of these has its own political goals and views and these are often pursued to the detriment of local rural communities.

Policing

Another significant issue that has recently surfaced in the rural areas is the reduction in policing, such that it has become reactive rather than proactive. This is not a criticism of the local police, who do their very best within the constraints they have. There have been two notable increases in crime in rural areas as a result:

1. Within the villages in Taunton Deane, there has been an increase in criminals knocking on front doors of the elderly and forcing entry to steal items and or money.
2. Another issue is the increase in fly-tipping on farms and in fields, often with animals in them, with the danger to the livestock that this creates, in addition to the inconvenience to the farmers.

# What is being done in local government to support rural economies? How effectively do other public bodies such as Local Enterprise Partnerships operate in rural areas, and how might coordination between bodies be improved?

Within Taunton Deane, there is a perception that property development is uncoordinated between the various levels of government, including Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), and the Borough Council makes the majority of decisions. As this council is also responsible for all planning in the Borough, it is perceived within the community that housing development approval is controlled by a few senior councillors within the council. This may or not be true, but this perception does foster potential accusations of “self-interest”.

LEPs are something of a mystery to most residents and even lower levels of government (particularly Parish Councils) and do not seem to have any visible public accountability. To outsiders, there appears to be little or no coordination between local government and the LEPs.

European money does not appear to come to Somerset (or at least Taunton Deane), unlike county neighbours Devon and Cornwall. This may be due to lack of initiative on behalf of the local government bodies. County, Borough and Parish Councils must have a more coordinated model and work together, rather than in isolation, for things to improve. Unfortunately, party politics and different council agendas, hinder such coordination.