



**Countryside  
Climate  
Network.**

Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP  
Secretary of State for Transport  
Great Minster House  
33 Horseferry Road  
London  
SW1P 4DR

12th February 2021

**Re: Future of Rural Transport**

Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing to you as concerned leaders of rural local authorities, under the auspices of the Countryside Climate Network, a cross-party leadership sub-group part of the UK100 network which represents over 40% of the UK's land area.

We are committed to delivering net zero within our communities, and as such are taking this opportunity to share firsthand the challenges we face in decarbonising our transport emissions. Our hope is for you to incorporate this wider and deeper understanding into shaping the future of rural transport. We are also writing to Robert Jenrick MP and Kwasi Kwarteng MP in parallel, because for too long the solutions to tackling climate change have been considered in siloes and without clear determination of how governmental departments can and should work together to deliver comprehensive solutions, we will fail to tackle the climate emergency.

Following our collective conversations in collaboration with industry representatives, we are keen that you consider these fundamental issues when further developing the vision for the Future of Rural Transport. We stand ready to work with you and your officers to shape solutions that bring benefits to the communities we lead.

**Innovation beyond technology**

The technological innovation outlined in the current Future of Rural Transport strategy may put a huge strain on local authorities unless clear support is provided for us to be able to implement it - we simply can't do it all.

Moreover, the strategy is framed almost exclusively in terms of technological innovation. In order to comprehensively tackle the decarbonisation and accessibility challenges that the

rural context confronts us with, we need innovative thinking. We need to consider how we want to be living in 2050 and what needs changing to get there. Who is moving and why? Huge cultural shifts are required and they must be facilitated by the government through regulatory change and longer term, non-competitive, ring-fenced funding.

### **Electrification**

There are a host of grid-related challenges to rural electrification, which we have raised with Kwasi Kwarteng MP in parallel to this letter. But from a transport perspective, it needs to be acknowledged urgently that the rural network infrastructure must be different than that which is rolled out in urban areas. As rural leaders, we would like to help the Government understand what our communities need in this respect - including education of different age groups, vehicle-to-grid roll out, affordable vehicle pilots - at scale, and opportunities to drive and experience EVs.

### **Modal shift**

Whilst EVs have a role to play, ultimately the shift away from single-occupancy private cars is required to decarbonise transport. This poses a significant challenge in contemporary rural communities. In terms of active travel, only massive scale investment can deliver a safe, rurally-appropriate cycle path network - for all cyclists. Associated considerations including cycle parking, storage in new developments and cycling education must be factored in. Creating scarcity of car parking is only effective if alternative infrastructure for active travel is offered and there are countless European examples that can be learned from in terms of how to deliver this successfully. Similarly making the UK's countryside towns and villages more walkable is a necessary step in the future of rural transport.

Car sharing is not new - some UK groups are already over 20 years old. But schemes are seldom established in rural areas, and we want this to change. We would like to develop successful business models for car clubs in the countryside, but they can only be realised with adequate seed funding and information. Only by introducing rural versions of Uber, demand-responsive community transport or similar schemes can they be tested and viable solutions identified. Government support to enable us to work together - creating scale across a network of rural communities - could make these schemes viable and compatible.

School transport is central to delivering modal shift - it is a false economy to reduce school transport to the bare minimum. There are other ways to deliver it - community EVs which could be redeployed during school hours would save money across the board - seed funding would enable such schemes to be trialled and rolled out.

### **Substandard public transport**

Modal shift towards public transport is also required, but decades of underfunding and drastic cuts have made many bus services into and between rural areas untenable. Coupled with Covid's impact on ridership, rural buses are in crisis, but they can and should be part of the future of rural transport if these shortcomings are addressed. There must be urgent post-Covid investment to improve travel choices and connectivity for people wanting to commute from rural to urban areas, understanding the different patterns of commuting that are likely to develop as a result of the pandemic. Over and above this, there needs to be a regulatory framework that allows councils to have more choice and flexibility over the

services they offer and the operators they contract. Seed funding to enable exploratory demand-responsive services and community-led schemes should be provided.

### **Understanding the rural context**

Rural populations are more reliant on cars because currently alternatives do not exist. This disproportionately isolates those without access to a car - both young and old and increasingly those who cannot afford car ownership. More research is needed to understand the complex needs of these diverse populations, as well as their current travel behaviour. One solution will not redress these imbalances; insight and education about the alternatives that will be feasible in rural areas is urgently required so that a suite of solutions can be deployed intelligently.

The Future of Rural Transport strategy fails to adequately acknowledge the role that lower tech solutions have to play, especially in poorer communities - we cannot simply replicate the urban model in rural areas.

### **Systems change**

To deliver a successful future-based strategy, it is important to think long term. And to improve rural transport, we need a consistent stream of long-term funding to address the inherent problems with the status quo.

We need the model of stop/start project-based investment to change in order to spend less time writing bids. Trust us to deliver local solutions, remove the competition between areas, foster collaboration, and devolve the funding to allow us to do so.

Instead of cost-benefit analysis, which will always render rural services unaffordable, let's learn from the successful schemes allocating funding based on an accessibility scale. Investment in reducing isolation and deprivation needs ring fencing for rural services.

We need to rethink the whole approach. In parallel to this letter, we've written to Robert Jenrick MP about planning for accessibility. And in doing so, highlighted that in reality the whole planning, transport, energy, public health paradigm needs collaborative rethinking. At the local level, the lack of officers, manpower, expertise and budgets means that the expectations currently placed on local governments are immense. Much as we sometimes have the legal competency, we are often held back by national regulations and legislation as well as limits to our capacity. The Government could do much more to facilitate local leaders in the effective implementation of the shift to Net Zero through supporting innovation and delivery.

### **Rural opportunities**

There are burgeoning rural opportunities that have not been fully explored. Some of the ideas that emerged from our discussions include utilising the space in and scale of rural areas to facilitate more electrification projects, better understanding the links that could be made to decarbonise the transport and agricultural sectors in partnership. Similarly, investigating the massive potential to optimise delivery routes for LGVs as they travel longer distances than necessary in the rural context. Our discussions highlighted that there is potential sometimes to replicate what happens in cities in certain areas, but simply shipping in urban solutions without considering the context may be harmful and costly. We need to make space to co-create our own solutions; we need to bring people together, bring them

with us and listen to what our communities want and need, and then make it easier for community-led initiatives to thrive.

Our world, and our rural communities are changing, the government needs to understand these changes so that interventions can be made in this dynamic context. Rural regeneration must be at the heart of any government effort to support local authorities to improve future transport. All solutions need to factor in economic, social and environmental considerations - and contribute towards achieving rapid decarbonisation.

UK100's Resilient Recovery Declaration highlighted the need to speed up the transition to low and zero emission travel and enable the UK to be a global leader in developing zero emission vehicles including buses and freight. It underlined that this should include a commitment to providing seamless access to electric vehicle charging infrastructure across the UK. Further support should be provided to citizens and businesses to switch from polluting vehicles to greener ones while also providing long-term investment in public transport networks and in creating built environments that prioritise walking and cycling.

We are keen to engage with you and your officials, especially in a cross-departmental way, to help shape the development of solutions that will bring benefits to rural areas. Collaboration with us will help build public consent and support in communities currently heavily dependent on fossil fuel based transport.

We look forward to your reply and establishing an ongoing relationship that can help the country achieve Net Zero in line with legislation and the science.

Yours sincerely



Cllr. Steve Count, Leader,  
Cambridgeshire County Council  
Chair, Countryside Climate Network  
Co-Chair, UK100



Polly Billington, Director, UK100  
Vice-Chair, Countryside Climate Network

On behalf of the following CCN members:

- Adur District Council
- Cambridgeshire County Council
- Canterbury City Council
- Central Bedfordshire Council
- Cheshire East Council
- Cornwall Council

- Cotswold District Council
- Derbyshire County Council
- Durham County Council
- Essex County Council
- Gloucestershire County Council
- Herefordshire Council
- Lancaster City Council
- Leicestershire County Council
- North Somerset District Council
- North Yorkshire County Council
- Shropshire Council
- South Gloucestershire Council
- South Lakeland District Council
- Staffordshire Moorlands District Council
- Suffolk County Council
- Wiltshire Council
- Worthing Borough Council
- Wychavon District Council

Cc:

Rt. Hon. Kwasi Kwarteng MP

Rt. Hon. Robert Jenrick MP