A BETTER PLAN FOR RURAL BRITAIN
Labour’s plan for Britain is based on a simple truth: that Britain only succeeds when working families succeed.

This means a country where hard work is rewarded, with high skill, high wage jobs. An economy built on strong and secure foundations, where we balance the books.

It means building a future for all our young people, so they can get world-class apprenticeships and access to affordable, higher education.

It means strong public services, rescuing our NHS, and supporting strong communities, where power is shared by people in every part of the country and where everyone plays by the same rules, including those at the very top of our society.

Nowhere is this more important than in rural Britain. Average wages are over £4500 lower than those in urban areas while rural families often face higher living costs. This means that too many people are now putting in a good, honest day’s work, but not getting rewarded. And no matter how hard they work, many don’t earn enough to make ends meet.

Rural communities are facing a low-pay, low-skill economy, a squeeze on their living standards, lack of affordable housing and insufficient power to make decisions about their future.

Labour has a better plan to help rural Britain meet these challenges.

Ed Miliband  Maria Eagle
Introduction

Our economy does not work for working people in rural Britain. Average annual wages are over £4500 lower than in urban areas and the gap between the two has grown by £1000 since 2010. For too many workers the rural economy is characterised by low skill and insecure work. However hard people work, many don’t earn enough to make ends meet. Family life is being squeezed as people juggle the demands of work and caring for their children. Energy, transport and childcare costs have spiralled across the country with rural areas often paying well above the average rate.

Public services that so many people rely on are under pressure, as services have been cut and standards have slipped. Rural communities have been amongst the worst affected by reductions in public services. Families have been left cut off from vital services like their GP, school or community centre. It’s no wonder that many people feel that decisions are made at distance in Whitehall and that politics ignores the things that matter to them.

The Conservatives will never be able to tackle the real challenges facing rural communities because they only stand for a privileged few at the top.

Labour has a better plan for a better future for working people in rural Britain. We will support a world class, thriving food and farming sector; back small and medium sized businesses that are the bedrock of the rural economy; create better paid, higher skilled jobs; mend the markets that rural families rely on from energy to transport; and deliver the public services that people want in their communities, along with the powers to shape services to their needs.

Labour’s better plan for rural communities:

• Tackle low-pay in agriculture by creating an industry-led taskforce on productivity and pay as well as boosting skills and apprenticeships.

• Strengthen requirements on developers to build affordable housing in rural areas.

• Bring the off-grid energy sector under the remit of the regulator for the first time.

• Stand up for farmers by creating a tough new supermarket watchdog by expanding the role and powers of the Groceries Code Adjudicator.

• Cut business rates for small businesses, which employ over two thirds of the rural workforce.

• Give rural communities more power over their own bus services.

• Ensure that all parts of the country benefit from affordable, high speed broadband by the end of the Parliament.

• Devolve power to our English county regions, giving communities the ability to shape the places in which they live.
1. Building an economy that works for working people

The rural economy supports about half a million businesses, contributing over £200 billion to the economy in England alone. But our rural economy faces significant challenges, from the lack of infrastructure and skills needed to raise productivity, to the low wages and insecurity that has kept living standards down. The country has seen the greatest fall in wages over a parliament since 1874. Labour’s better plan means supporting working people in rural communities to succeed with higher skilled, better paid jobs and improved living standards.

**Farming & Food**

The farming industry makes an enormous contribution to the UK economy as well as playing an important role in maintaining and enhancing the rural landscape. Around half a million people work in agriculture producing 60 per cent of the food consumed in Britain. We want to build on this and create a world-leading food and farming sector that generates better paid jobs and apprenticeships across the rural economy.

But to make that happen we need to do far more to stand up for our farmers. Farming needs coordinated government support to encourage growth, innovation and new entrants. The absence of an effective food and farming strategy over the last five years has left the agricultural sector at a disadvantage. And the risk of leaving the EU in the next five years with a Conservative government would be disastrous for the rural economy. Labour is clear that British farming’s best interest means remaining in the EU.

There are huge power imbalances in the food sector with farmers facing growing pressure from retailers. Dairy farmers, for example, are going out of business in huge numbers. There were 11,448 dairy producers in England and Wales in 2010, compared to just 9,867 in April 2015 – a drop of 14 per cent. Instead of creating a tough supermarket watchdog to stand up for farmers, the Conservative-led Government created a Groceries Code Adjudicator (GCA) with limited powers. The GCA’s remit only covers a narrow part of the supply chain, leaving many farmers with little protection from retailers. The GCA also lacks the power to launch its own investigations and has
only been given the power to levy fines in the last few weeks of the last parliament after sustained pressure from campaigners and the Labour Party.

The British farming sector is known for some of the highest quality standards in the world. Government plays an important role in protecting this reputation by cracking down on food fraud. But the Tory decision to weaken the Food Standards Agency has undermined the ability to protect standards, as evidenced in the run up to the horsemeat scandal.

Labour has a better plan. We will put in place a long term strategy for the sector by reinstating ‘Food 2030’. This will set a growth plan for the food sector, improve productivity and create jobs across the agricultural supply chain. We will promote the best of British produce and use government procurement to back British farmers. We will champion farming in the EU to get the best for our farmers, including through better country-of-origin labelling. Labour will implement a new comprehensive plan to eradicate bovine TB without the need for ineffective and inhumane badger culls. And we will strengthen the Food Standards Agency (FSA) to stop food fraud, improve safety and standards, and maintain the quality of British produce. To protect food producers from unfair practices by the major supermarkets, we will create a tough new supermarket watchdog that can launch investigations across the supply chain by expanding the role and powers of the GCA.

**Backing small business**

While agriculture shapes the rural landscape, small businesses form the bedrock of the rural economy with over two thirds of the rural workforce in England employed by small and micro businesses. Over the last five years, too many of these businesses have found that rising costs and lack of government support are holding them back. Labour will address the rising costs for small businesses by putting them first in line for tax cuts. Instead of cutting Corporation Tax again for the largest firms, we will cut and then freeze business rates for over 1.5 million smaller business properties.

We will develop a banking system that works for businesses in every region and every sector in Britain. The long-standing problems of our banking system mean that too many small and medium-sized businesses cannot get the finance they need to invest and grow.

Labour will establish a British Investment Bank with the mission to help businesses grow and to create wealth and jobs. It will have the resources to improve access to finance for small and medium-sized businesses, and will support a network of regional banks that support local needs. This will mean that rural businesses will have access to regional banks that are rooted in the local community with a better understanding of the rural economy.

We will tackle the Conservative-led government’s failure to roll out broadband to all our communities. Technological change is a major driver for economic development and the internet is essential to doing business by providing access to employment, finance and now farming subsidies. Yet people living and working in rural areas are being left behind.

Labour will ensure that all parts of the country benefit from affordable, high speed broadband by the end of the Parliament. We will work with the industry and the regulator to maximise private sector investment and deliver the mobile infrastructure needed to extend coverage and reduce ‘not spots’, including in areas of market failure.

**Better work and better pay**

Britain’s route to prosperity and higher living standards is through more secure and better paid jobs. But Conservative policies are causing whole sectors of the economy to be dragged into a race to the bottom on wages and skills. Agriculture is associated with considerable problems of low pay and insecurity, and the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board under this Government has exacerbated this problem, removing protections that previously helped to prevent a race to the bottom on wages and conditions in the sector. The Government has weakened employment rights and promoted a hire-and-fire culture. Labour believes our economy can only succeed in a race to the top: competing in the world with better work, better pay and better skills.

Raising wages is not only good for employees and the exchequer, but also good for businesses, underpinning a modern and engaged workforce. A Labour Government will tackle low pay by raising the National Minimum Wage to more than £8 by October 2019. We will encourage employers to pay more by using government procurement to promote the campaign for a Living Wage.
A better plan for business

and introducing new Make Work Pay contracts, providing tax rebates to businesses that sign up to become Living Wage employers in the first year of a Labour government.

We also need sector-specific action to tackle the underlying causes of low pay and insecurity. Labour will empower the Low Pay Commission to set up industry-led taskforces, with employee representation, to raise productivity and pay in sectors with high levels of low pay.

One of the first of these sector taskforces will focus on agriculture, in order to address the damage done by the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board and ensure agricultural workers are properly protected at the sector level. We will further support employers in the sector to raise standards by giving them more control over skills funding and standards, in exchange for working to increase the number of apprenticeships across the sector – and giving them the powers they need to stop free-riding employers that do not train, such as the power to set licences to practice for skilled agricultural roles.

**Mending the markets that people rely on**

Labour will stand up for working families and businesses against vested interests. We will reform the broken markets that people rely on most so that families and businesses get a fair deal.

Energy bills have risen by over £300 since 2010. Lack of competition and transparency has allowed the large energy companies to get away with increasing bills when wholesale prices rise, but not cutting them when they fall. The regulator has failed to take decisive action to protect consumers.

Labour will freeze energy bills until 2017, ensuring that bills can fall but not rise, and we will give the regulator the power to cut bills this winter. During the freeze, we will reform the energy market so that it delivers fairer prices and a better deal for working families.

We will simplify energy tariffs and make it easier for people to compare prices and so get the best deal. Rural businesses will be protected by ending unfair contracts and automatic rollovers to more expensive tariffs.

Labour will also take action to stop the race to the bottom in agriculture by banning exploitative zero-hours contracts, so that if you work regular hours you get a regular contract. We will tackle exploitative practices such as overcrowded and tied-housing arrangements by giving local authorities and other relevant agencies a role in enforcing the minimum wage and introducing a register of private landlords. We will make it illegal to use agency workers to undercut the wages of permanent employees, and will establish a special Home Office Enforcement Unit, with more than 100 staff, to work with the Gangmasters Licensing Authority to root out the illegal exploitation which undercut wages and conditions for local workers.

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We will end the unfairness that many rural families face in an unregulated off-grid energy market. Labour will extend the remit of the new energy watchdog to off-grid households, protecting millions of rural families. Labour will also pay Winter Fuel Payments earlier for pensioners using off-grid energy, protecting them from excessive price spikes on off-grid energy at the onset of winter. We will also bring down energy bills by making homes more energy efficient, delivering a million interest free loans for energy home improvements in the next Parliament.

Living standards have been hit by fare increases on public transport. Since 2010, rail fares have risen by 20 per cent, leaving passengers paying the highest fares in Europe. Similarly, bus fares have risen by 27 per cent at the same time as 2,000 routes have been cut. The impact of this has been most acute in rural areas where families spend almost £4500 on transport, almost £800 more than the national average. And while people in rural communities pay more, their service is often worse. Less than half of those living in smaller rural settlements have access to a regular bus service.

Labour will reform our transport system in order to provide more public control and put the public interest first.

Rail fares will be frozen next year to help commuters whilst we implement reforms. A strict cap will be introduced on every route for any future fare rises, and a new legal right for passengers will be created to access the cheapest ticket for their journey.

City and county regions will be given more power over the way buses are operated in their area. They will be able to decide routes, bear down on fares, drive improvements in services, and bring together trains, buses and trams...
into a single network with smart ticketing. These powers will enable county regions to decide what bus links best serve their communities. For example, opting for community transport to serve isolated rural communities in place of declining bus services.

**Labour will:**

- Put in place a long term strategy for the food and farming sector by reinstating ‘Food 2030’.
- Create a tough new supermarket watchdog by expanding the role and powers of the Groceries Code Adjudicator.
- Create a new industry-led taskforce to tackle low pay in agriculture as well as boosting apprenticeships and skills.
- Develop a banking system that works for businesses in every region and every sector in Britain and establish a British Investment Bank with the mission to help businesses grow and to create wealth and jobs.
- Cut and then freeze business rates for smaller business properties.
- Tackle the Conservative-led Government’s failure to roll out broadband to all our communities.
- Tackle rural low-pay by banning exploitative zero-hour contracts, raising the National Minimum Wage to more than £8 an hour by October 2019, giving local authorities a role in strengthening enforcement against those paying less than the legal amount and supporting employers to pay the Living Wage.
- Bring off-grid energy supply under the remit of the regulator for the first time.
- Give rural communities more power over bus services and provide support for the community transport sector.
2. Helping families and communities

Our NHS, care services, schools, colleges and other public services make up the essential fabric of our country. People need them to be able to live secure and fulfilling lives. But under the Conservatives they are under threat.

Public services in rural areas can face particular challenges. In some parts of the country, services can struggle with staff recruitment. Disadvantaged groups can be more dispersed and harder to reach. And a one-size-fits-all approach to services can often fail to address the particular issues facing rural communities.

Labour wants to ensure that public services in rural areas are properly supported and that communities themselves are empowered to shape the design and delivery of services to better match local needs.

The NHS

David Cameron promised to protect the NHS but he has broken that promise. There is a crisis in A&E, waiting lists are at their highest for six years, and one in four people now wait a week or more to see a GP. Labour will rescue our NHS, invest in its future and join up services from home to hospital.

We will start with the promise of investment so that the NHS has time to care. Labour will invest in 8,000 more GPs, 20,000 more nurses and 3,000 more midwives, paid for in part by a Mansion Tax on properties worth over £2 million, a levy on tobacco firms, and by tackling tax avoidance. We will guarantee people a GP appointment within 48 hours – and on the same day for those who need it. We will create a Cancer Treatments Fund so patients have access to the latest drugs, surgery and radiotherapy. By 2020 patients will wait no longer than one week for vital cancer tests.

Labour’s reforms will tackle the staffing crisis facing the NHS in many parts of the country. For example, there are currently GP shortages in many rural areas, so Labour’s commitment to 8,000 more GPs by 2020 will make a real difference to tackling pressures and improving access in under-doctored areas. The same is true for our commitment to 20,000 more nurses and 3,000 more midwives, who will help staff areas where services in more isolated parts of the country can often struggle with recruitment.

There is also anxiety about service changes and reconfigurations in many rural areas. Too often patients and the public are not involved in drawing up proposals for changes to their local NHS services, and once a proposal has been made, it often feels as if the decision has already been taken and the public consultation is little more than a box-ticking exercise. Labour will give local people a real say over the future of their local NHS services. For the first time patients and the public will be given a seat at the table from the very start of any process that draws up plans for change.

Education for our children

Since 2010/11 the proportion of pupils at rural schools achieving 5 or more A*-C grades has been lower compared with those attending schools in urban areas, with the gap widening every year. Addressing the gap in rural attainment will require a Labour Government that sees investment in education as an investment in our children and in the future of the country. We will protect the entire education budget, including the early years, schools and post-16 education, so that it rises in line with inflation.

Many areas that were underperforming in 2010 are still struggling today; in fact many have got worse. And while we need to continue to improve education in urban areas, we now also face a new challenge - raising standards in rural and provincial areas and our seaside towns which are falling behind. Simply changing the structure of schools, turning them into academies or setting up new Free Schools, has failed to deliver high standards.

So Labour will introduce new Directors of School Standards who will be locally appointed, locally accountable and have a remit to tackle underperformance and respond to the views of parents. Building on the success of London Challenge, Directors of School Standards will build collaboration between schools, identify problems and intervene early to help fix them. To put an end to low expectations and chronic underperformance each local area will agree its own ‘Standards Challenge’ – an area-wide school improvement plan including a new public target for raising standards and attainment locally, for which the Director of School Standards will be accountable.

We will end the wasteful and poorly performing Free Schools programme, and switch resources to where they are
needed, allowing us to cap class sizes for five, six and seven year olds at 30 pupils or under.

**Safer communities**

Rural crime has been on the rise under David Cameron’s Government with the cost to the rural economy estimated to be as much as £44.5 million in 2013, a rise of 5.2 per cent from the previous year. Such crime creates fear and insecurity. We can only live happy and fulfilled lives if we know that we are safe and that we are not at risk of violation of our person or property.

Labour believes British policing is at its best when it is rooted in local communities, proactively preventing crime, rather than simply reacting to emergencies.

We will protect neighbourhood policing and safeguard over 10,000 police officers for the next three years. This will be backed up by a new statutory ‘Local Policing Commitment’, guaranteeing neighbourhood policing in every community. We will strengthen community safety partnerships to give local people a role in setting priorities for neighbourhood policing and a say over the appointment of local police commanders.

**Better childcare**

Rural families pay £600 more per year for childcare than families in urban areas, and they are less likely to have family babysitters living nearby.

We will help working families by expanding free childcare from 15 to 25 hours per week for parents of three and four year-olds, paid for with an increase in the bank levy. We will also introduce a legal guarantee for parents of primary school children to access wraparound childcare from 8am to 6pm through their local primary school.

We will prioritise early years intervention to give children and parents the best start in family life, and restore the role of Sure Start centres as family hubs. Sure Start will have an obligation to provide families with access to childcare, opening their facilities to charities and local childcare providers. More widely, we will encourage local services to co-locate, so that they work together to shift from sticking plaster solutions to integrated early help.

**Building homes for rural communities**

Britain is in the midst of the biggest housing crisis in a generation, with the lowest levels of house building in peacetime since the 1920s. Young people have been priced out of home ownership. Fewer affordable homes are being built, homelessness is rising, and millions face insecurity and poor standards in the private rented sector.

The housing crisis has hit rural communities hard and policies like the bedroom tax have had a particularly damaging effect in rural areas where there is typically less social housing and larger properties, forcing people to move away from their friends, families, and the areas they grew up in, because there are often no other homes to move to.

The average cost of a rural home is ten times the average wage and in 90 per cent of rural areas the average home costs eight times the average wage or more. Despite there being 235,000 people on rural housing waiting lists only 9540 affordable homes were provided in rural areas last year – just one for every 25 needed.
Another five years of the Tories would lead to a halving of annual rural affordable home provision as a result of Tory policies to reduce requirements for affordable homes on small sites.

Everyone should be able to live in a secure home, whether they rent or buy. We will make sure that at least 200,000 homes a year get built by 2020 – almost double the current level. Our comprehensive plan to tackle the housing crisis will give local communities new powers to build the homes they need in the places they want to live. To help young people and families get on the housing ladder, we will allow local authorities to give first time buyers that have lived in an area for more than three years first call on up to half of the homes built locally. And to help them buy their home, we will offer these first time buyers zero stamp duty on properties under £300,000 so that they can put this money towards their deposit. We will give local authorities new ‘use it or lose it’ powers to encourage developers to build rather than landbank. We will increase competition in the housebuilding industry by backing small builders. We will build more affordable homes through tougher requirements for affordable housing in new rural developments including on small sites and prioritising investment in housing. And we will scrap the Bedroom Tax which is having a severe impact on rural communities where there are fewer alternative properties for tenants to move to.

**Improving employment support**

The Work Programme has been delivered in a way that too often fails to work with local authorities who understand the needs of the local area and job market. This means that rural areas in particular can lose out, and the programme overall has seen more people return to the Jobcentre than find a job. Labour will work with local authorities to commission the replacement to the Work Programme, to ensure that it offers a more tailored approach, including one that understands the needs of rural communities, for example, longer travel to work distances.

Labour will:

- Rescue our NHS, invest in its future and join up services from home to hospital.
- End the wasteful Free Schools programme, and switch resources to where they are needed, allowing us to cap class sizes for five, six and seven year olds at 30 pupils or under.
- Protect neighbourhood policing in rural communities
- Expand free childcare to 25 hours a week for 3 and 4 year olds and provide wraparound childcare from 8am – 6pm through local primary schools.
- Build more affordable homes through tougher requirements for affordable housing in new rural developments including on small sites and prioritising investment in housing.
- Scrap the Bedroom Tax which is having a severe impact on rural communities.
We feel passionately about our local landscapes, our open spaces and wildlife. In a globalised world, our local environment provides us with a sense of place and belonging. Labour has always believed that everyone should have access to nature, whoever they are, or wherever they live.

That’s why the next Labour Government will support the work of the Natural Capital Committee to deliver a 25 year plan to reverse the decline of our natural environment, tackle climate change and increase access to nature.

Labour’s 25 year plan will have clear five year milestones and a focus on bringing nature closer to people by making public access to green spaces a priority. We will defend the public forest estate from any future privatisation while reforming the role of the Forestry Commission so that new woodland is created closer to the places where more people live. We will deliver a step-change in nature conservation building on the work of the Lawton review and empowering communities to protect and improve the natural environment. We will ensure the development of coherent ecological networks to protect wildlife and reverse the decline of pollinators. We will maintain current protections for the Greenbelt but respect local decision making over Greenbelt configuration and introduce a strengthened ‘brownfield first’ policy making sure that as much building as possible takes place on previously developed land.

Our Labour values tell us that we have a moral duty to treat the animals we share our planet with in a humane and compassionate way. No other major political party has such a proven track record of decisive action for animals at home, on farms and in the wild. We will build on our strong record on animal welfare – starting with an end to the Government’s ineffective and cruel badger cull. We will improve the protection of dogs and cats, ban wild animals in circuses, defend the hunting ban and deal with wildlife crime associated with shooting. We will use our strong domestic record on animal welfare to lead the global fight against animal cruelty.

Labour will:

• Bring nature closer to people by planting new woodland and trees closer to where more people live.
• Protect the public forest estate from Tory privatisation.
• Develop a 25 year plan for the recovery of nature with clear five year milestones to measure progress.
• End the ineffective and inhumane badger culls.
• Improve the protection of dogs and cats.
• Ban wild animals in circuses.
• Defend the hunting ban.
• Tackle wildlife crime and reduce animal cruelty on shooting estates.
• Lead the global fight against animal cruelty.
A One Nation Labour government will work for all of Britain – for those living in rural, coastal and market town communities as well as in cities. While it is crucial that the challenges faced by those communities are understood in every Whitehall department, it is only by trusting them to make decisions about their own futures that we can truly unlock the potential of our rural communities.

Labour believes meaningful and lasting change for the better is only possible when people are given the power to change things for themselves. Our governing mission is to break out of the traditional top-down, Westminster knows best approach, and devolve power and decision making to people and local places.

Instead of imposing change on communities we will give them more control over schools, health care, policing, skills, housing and transport, and make use of their insights into what works and what does not. We will promote and encourage a model of citizenship based on participation and shared responsibility.

We will embark on the biggest devolution of power to our English cities and county regions in a hundred years with an English Devolution Act. It will transfer £30 billion of funding to city and county regions, along with new powers over economic development, skills, employment, housing, and business support. This will include control over local transport systems so that in future, local bodies can integrate trains, buses, cycling, and trams into a single network. We will enable city and county regions to retain 100 per cent of additional business rates raised from growth in their area.

In return for greater devolution of funding and responsibility, we will establish local Public Accounts Committees so that every pound spent by local bodies creates value for money for local taxpayers.

Devolution does not end at town halls. People know best about the complex problems they face, and they are best placed to work out how to solve them. The English New Deal begins the process of giving individuals and communities more power and control over how they are governed and over the design of their public services. It will support people who need care to live independently, help troubled families to turn their lives around, and make sure that every child has a good start in life with early-years intervention and quality childcare.

Labour will break from decades of centralisation in England and devolve power to our county regions, giving communities the ability to shape the places in which they live. Local people often know how to meet their priorities better than Whitehall officials which means more efficient spending allowing the next Labour Government to balance the books and cut the deficit every year. By empowering people in coastal and rural areas to make decisions about their future the next Labour Government will build a new kind of economy, one that tackles the cost of living crisis and builds prosperity that can reach beyond our city regions.

Labour will:

• Devolve £30 billion of funding to city and county regions, along with new powers over economic development, skills, employment, housing, and business support.

• Establish local Public Accounts Committees so that every pound spent by local bodies creates value for money for local taxpayers.

• Devolve power to our county regions, giving communities the ability to shape the places they live.
A better plan for Rural Britain
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