

## The rural South East – a perspective from SERB

### 1. Narrative

From the gardens on Dungeness beach to the man-made clouds rising above Didcot's cooling towers, the South East is a most rural place. It is not only England's biggest rural region but also its most economically vibrant, naturally beautiful, diverse and populous. Its towns and villages have an air of prosperity that stems from their rich built heritage and their ease of access to the global economy

It is no coincidence that successful businesses, large and small, want to be located in or near the rural South East. Our farmers and land managers have ensured that it is a rural environment where people want to live, work and visit. **Farming and forestry may be small in terms of direct contribution to GVA and the number of people they employ, but they are substantial in creating an environment for the success of all other sectors.** The challenge is to ensure that this continues whilst also contributing to the wider goals of maintaining biodiversity, protecting the region from the adverse effects of climate change and helping to ensure supplies of clean water are available for all.

Within the homes and converted farm buildings of the countryside there also exists a successful small, home-based and micro-business economy that is diverse and resilient. **The contribution that this sector can make to the future of the national and regional economy is substantial but highly dependent on meeting the challenge of high quality digital connectivity.**

The region's quality of life comes not just from its relative economic prosperity but also from its environment. The legacy of the last millennium has been a stunning and varied pattern of towns, villages and hamlets. The people who live in these places, however, are their lifeblood. **Affordable housing, rural schools and services, economic development, traditional land management/craft skills and retention of local facilities are not ends in themselves.** Investment and positive planning, including adaptation to climate change, is a necessary part of a sustainable future for the ###,000 homes and families that already make up this extraordinary inheritance.

Investment and positive planning are also needed for the management of the region's natural resources, especially water. More than most other parts of the country the South East must plan for hotter summers, wetter winters, challenges from coastal erosion and the prospect of inland flooding. **It will be critical to ensure that all the region's major users of water resources are working to a common agenda and that this is consistent with both the spatial planning of the region and the contribution it must make to the food and energy economies of the country.**

The region's transport infrastructure is dominated by radial routes from London. However travel patterns at the local, rural, level are complex with many journeys starting and finishing in relatively rural areas. Travel to education, work, retail, and leisure are highly complex and conditioned by the choices of those with the means to exercise them. **The challenge is to achieve both social inclusion for those rural people with lesser means and a reduction in carbon footprint from everyone.** It is both the environment and those at risk of isolation who pay the price of this challenge not being met.

Not everyone is able to share in the relative prosperity of the South East's economy. There are, for instance, many more disadvantaged people spread across the rural areas of the region than are to be found in any of the small number of most disadvantaged coastal and urban neighbourhoods. **The challenge is to tackle health inequality and economic disadvantage where it is woven into the fabric of otherwise prosperous rural communities.** There is a risk of growing isolation amongst an ageing rural population combined with inequality between those people and families who do not share in the more general prosperity and those who do.

In many rural areas public and commercial services have withdrawn to the larger towns on the grounds of economic viability. **The relatively populous rural South East has seen services withdraw even more rapidly from large villages than other regions where they would be the focal point for a dispersed rural area.**

While the rural South East has the largest regional rural population in England its rural areas must also consider the needs of both London and the major towns and cities within the region. Our major urban centres must rely on the rural areas of the South East and East of England to provide them with water, clean air, food, recreation and places to dispose of their waste. The rural areas of the South East depend on the prosperity of the capital to underpin the land based economy and maintain the landscape either through subsidies or more direct investment. **The interests of urban centres and their rural neighbours are, therefore, inextricably intertwined.**

More than anywhere else in England the South East is a place where great natural beauty exists alongside burgeoning economic activity; where some of the nations richest people live closely alongside families living on painfully modest incomes and where 'rural' can all too easily become a shorthand for 'privileged'. **The great challenge for the South East is to protect its natural environment and biodiversity, build a strong economy and harbour carefully its natural resources whilst not letting rural communities become unsustainable preserves of just those who can afford the entry price**