

MEDIA RELEASE

A fairer deal for rural communities

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John Howell, the MP for Henley, welcomed a new set of rural policy proposals which aim to respect those living in rural areas, return power to rural communities, protect rural services and revive the rural economy across South Oxfordshire.

A new policy paper, launched as part of the Conservatives' *Rural Action* campaign, outlines a series of proposals which include:

- Scrapping limits on surplus places so that good schools in villages and small towns can prosper and new ones can open where parents, not Whitehall, want them.
- Giving councils new powers to allow local business rate discounts to support local shops or encourage the reuse of empty rural buildings.
- Helping thousands of small rural firms by making business rate relief automatic for eligible small businesses.
- Supporting the Post Office network, giving them freedom to offer a wider range of business services and encourage local authorities to open 'council counters' in local branches.
- Using unspent money from the TV digital switchover to give remote areas better broadband coverage.
- Cutting the red tape that makes it increasingly difficult to put on events such as fetes and other social activities.
- Ensuring fairer funding for councils such as SODC and devolving down funding and powers currently held by distant regional quangos.

John Howell MP said:

"The Henley constituency is currently some 230 square miles in size and at the next election will get substantially bigger. Although we are sandwiched between Reading and Oxford, this is a highly rural area.

"Like other similar areas, it has seen local services withdrawn and the voice of rural communities marginalised. We need a new approach to reverse the trend of centralisation and interference, so that rural communities and the rural way of life across our area are respected.

"I am particularly keen to see the proposal to use unspent money from the TV digital switchover to provide better broadband coverage in our area."

Notes to Editors

The *Conservative Agenda for Rural Communities* is available at <http://www.conservativeruralaction.com/policy/>

A full list of proposals is set out below:

Rural Services

- We will scrap limits on surplus places so that good small schools can prosper and new ones can open where parents, not Whitehall, want them. We will encourage parents, charities and others to start new schools, by cutting red tape from planning laws to building regulations, and give parents control of the taxpayers' money that the government spends on each pupil.
- We will legislate to give local authorities a new discretionary power to offer business rate discounts – of whatever form they choose – as long as they can fund them. This will allow rural authorities to apply appropriate local solutions to local problems, whether by averting the demolition of office buildings, encouraging the reuse of empty rural buildings, or preventing the closure of village shops.
- We will help thousands of small rural firms by making business rate relief automatic for eligible small businesses in England.
- We will pilot the successful demand responsive transport schemes which operate in rural areas of mainland Europe, often coordinated with main services, as recommended by the Commission for Integrated Transport.
- We will encourage school trips to farms and the countryside to enable children to gain a real understanding of the natural environment and food production by allowing teachers more discretion to organise visits and sweeping away absurd health and safety regulations.
- We will halt the top-down imposition of polyclinics across the country because we understand that local GP surgeries are an important and valued part of our rural communities.
- We will use the existing Sure Start programme to introduce a universal health visitor service for new parents, which will help those in rural areas who might have difficulty accessing post-natal support services.
- We will work to bridge the 'digital divide' by using money such as the unused BBC digital switchover funding to facilitate the investment required to give remote areas better broadband coverage and by supporting innovative solutions, such as community broadband schemes, which can deliver next generation connection at relatively low cost.

Protecting village life

- We will facilitate new business opportunities for post offices, giving them freedom to offer a wider range of business services and encourage local authorities to open 'council counters' in local branches.
- We will cut taxes on low alcohol beers and ciders, and raise duty on problem drinks like high strength ciders and alcopops, to help promote the traditional pub while targeting binge drinking.
- We will let councils cut the red tape that makes it unnecessarily difficult for charities, sports clubs and other local groups to put on events such as fetes and other social activities unless there is strong local objection.
- We will announce measures to ensure that consideration of social value is built into each central government decision that affects local communities. When making decisions, we will take account not just of economic efficiency but also the important social role of rural services and thus ensure that decisions are cost effective in the long term as well as the short term.

Affordable housing

- We will encourage the creation of new bodies – Local Housing Trusts – for those villages that wish to develop new housing to benefit their community. These bodies will have power to develop new homes and other space for community use, provided there is strong local support.
- We will help to establish a voluntary body representing Local Housing Trusts to pool knowledge, technical skills and experience to help provide assistance and guidance to newly formed Trusts.
- We will relax the rules that prevent thousands of habitable empty properties being used to house those on local authority waiting lists.
- We will enable rural councils to revise their current local plans in order to protect Green Belt land.

Fairer funding

- We will give the independent Audit Commission a new duty to report to Parliament on the draft Local Government Finance Settlement each year, thereby removing the political element from the allocation of grant settlements for individual local authorities.
- We will drastically reduce central government ring-fencing by moving away from a system of dedicated funding streams and towards block grants to local government. In doing so we will hand back to rural communities the power to decide how to spend billions of pounds a year.
- We will operate the system set up by the Sustainable Communities Act to ensure that, when local residents have a particular priority, central government money is directed towards fulfilling that priority wherever possible.

- We will devolve European Union funding for axis 3 to local authorities, who know best the needs of their communities, and we will encourage them to allocate grant funding across the full range of permitted measures, including village renewal and basic services.