Leading across Government
The evidence for poor economic and social conditions in some rural areas is both compelling and measurable. Our target is to lay solid foundations to achieve sustainable and long-term regeneration in these areas by:

- focusing economic instruments more effectively on areas suffering market failures through Regional Development Agency activity, improved business support and advice, and improved workforce training and education;
- taking action on the sustainable farming and food strategy;
- taking local and regional community regeneration measures as the fishing industry restructures;
- securing benefits from new technologies such as broadband to enable business growth; and
- developing social enterprise as a regeneration tool in disadvantaged areas.

This is a major challenge. We will focus on key areas where we can make progress to ensure that public services meet the needs of the majority of rural residents, and that these services meet the particular needs of the most disadvantaged in rural communities.

A key focus will be improvements to specific services where there are particular rural challenges for delivery. These services are:

- healthcare, where we have to work nationally and regionally to counter health inequalities;
- post-16 education and training where we must reach those trapped in a cycle of poor skills, poor expectations and poor employment by working more closely with business and by adapting approaches to training provision;
- public and community transport where we must use our own Countryside Agency programmes and work across government to maximise the benefits from current programmes so that they reach those most in need;
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- access to cash where the challenge is to work with Government departments, banks and others to extend the availability and accessibility of bank accounts and extend community finance; and

- access to public services via the internet where we must secure wide benefits and accessibility to this increasingly important means of delivery.

Priority 2.
To develop the capacity of rural communities to deliver local improvements.

Many rural needs and problems must be solved locally. However, the capacity of some rural communities to do this is limited, so the way to enable action is often through a catalyst such as a local entrepreneur, voluntary sector or local authority facilitation or assistance to link them to people who can help. We will therefore help by:

- providing additional support to improve the ability of the voluntary sector to support individuals and communities that most need help;

- succeeding with our Countryside Agency-run Vital Villages programme which funds parish plans to help communities to identify their needs and provides grants for local services and community transport; and

- launching the Quality Parish initiative.

Priority 3.
To develop the value of the countryside.

The foot-and-mouth disease outbreak underlined the economic importance of countryside leisure and recreation. When visitors stayed away, rural businesses and communities suffered from the transfer to urban-based activity. We will:

- deliver the Countryside and Rights of Way Act provision to substantially extend access to the countryside by 2005;

- work with Regional Development Agencies, local partners and business to identify economic opportunities arising from countryside recreation and leisure for tourism, building on experience in National Parks where we have established a Sustainability Fund; and
work with the Department of Health and agencies to extend the health walks concept so that people have access to, and doctors can prescribe, fixed routes to encourage exercise on health grounds and as part of convalescence regimes.

Priority 4.
To ensure that policies and programmes are fit for purpose.

We want to ensure that Government is both better informed and more responsive to the needs of rural communities by:

- embedding rural objectives in domestic Government policy with clear rural targets for the key strands of Government policy through continued rural proofing across government and a review of the Rural White Paper which is to be completed by Winter 2003;

- better policy and programme development through the creation of a structured and regularly updated evidence base on all key rural economic, social and environmental drivers;

- strengthening our partnerships with Regional Development Agencies, local government and the private and voluntary sector to tackle social exclusion and economic failure;

- make a success of the new National and Regional Rural Forums as conduits for rural interests to guide Government policy; and

- improving delivery arrangements for policy and programmes in rural areas; we have established a Review Team led by Lord Haskins, the outcome of which will be agreed by summer 2004.