

A graphic featuring the words "RURAL VOICE" in bold white capital letters. The text is centered within a rounded rectangular frame that has a green left side and a blue right side. Behind the text and frame are several vertical bars of varying heights, transitioning from green on the left to blue on the right, resembling a stylized soundwave or bar chart.

RURAL VOICE

Understanding and addressing the housing challenges facing rural communities



Housing under construction in Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire



Earlier this year, Connexus launched its Corporate Plan 2025–2030: *homes you can build a life in*. The plan reaffirmed our commitment to providing good quality, safe, and affordable homes, while also focusing on investing in our communities, building trust and delivering services that are responsive and efficient.

Building on our Rural Ambition campaigning work carried out during the 2024 general election, Rural Voice explores the unique challenges facing the rural communities we serve, many of which have been overlooked for decades. This includes widespread inequality and the rurality premium – seeing those living in the countryside paying more for housing, goods and services than those in urban areas.

Rural Voice sets out how Connexus is responding to these challenges, and calls for greater support from those we work alongside, including policymakers at both local and national levels, as well as peers in the housing and public sectors.

There is much to do, but by working together with a joined-up approach I’m confident we can create lasting change in our rural communities, creating thriving towns and villages where people can put down roots, and build a life in their home.

Kate Smith
Connexus Chief Executive

Invest in new and existing rural affordable housing

Access to affordable and high-quality homes remains one of the biggest challenges facing the rural communities we serve. Too often limited supply, high demand, and poor infrastructure make it harder for people to stay in the places they grew up in – with many moving to urban areas out of necessity for work or to raise a family.

The actions opposite set out how we will deliver up to 200 new affordable homes a year across a range of tenures, working closely with our local partners and those in the community to ensure our approach is place-based, inclusive, and sustainable.

What we will do

- **Build homes that meet local need** through new build and regeneration, aiming for up to 200 energy efficient homes a year in places where people are proud to live.
- **Invest in our existing homes** and bring them up to modern energy efficient standards wherever possible.
- **Appraise new development opportunities** with a place-based strategy and commit to a proportion of new homes ‘replaced in place’, while recognising this may cost more and impact the overall number of new homes we can deliver.

- **Explore unused or spare land in rural towns and villages**, working with local authority partners to unlock it for much needed affordable housing development and review our own portfolio to ensure we maximise the use of our own land.
- **Engage local communities early** in the development and regeneration process, ensuring local voices are heard and help shape proposals and the work we do.
- **Work with our strategic partners, developers and planners** to champion innovation in rural housing design,

effective use of land, mixed tenure development, and connected transport infrastructure.

In return we need

- **Recognition of the additional costs and complexities** of delivering rural affordable housing at scale, ensuring the new social affordable homes programme and other funding models reflect this reality for rural areas and are targeted towards both new build homes and the regeneration of older properties with a rural premium to meet the need.
- **A realistic and collaborative approach to planning**, which focuses on the delivery of multi-tenure affordable housing in line with local plans, while maximising opportunities to develop on rural exception sites.
- **Regular conversations about emerging local opportunities** which could unlock unused or underutilised land in the local area for new affordable housing.
- **Constructive feedback and challenge** during consultation and conversations, which builds trust and creates better outcomes for our communities.
- **Specific top-up funding or amendments** to the rent model for affordable housing which would allow for the full installation of sustainable green technologies in rural areas, such as photovoltaic panels and electronic vehicle charging infrastructure.

- **Innovative building technologies** forming part of affordable housing specifications, including the use of timber frame construction and low environmental impact sustainable materials.

This will help us to

Deliver the right homes in the right places, give local people a say in what happens, and create connected communities which are sustainable for future generations to come.



Affordable housing nearing completion in Much Wenlock, Shropshire

What the data tells us...

A rural cost of living survey in 2023 found 20% of respondents indicating that housing costs consume between **30% and 50% of their household net or take-home income.**

Source: Rural Services Network and Citizens Advice – Rural Issues Group, Rural Cost of Living Survey 2023: Final Report, 2023.

Between 2020 and 2023, **waiting lists in rural areas increased by 20%**, compared to 14% in urban areas. In the countryside, **this equates to an additional 34,021 people** on waiting lists.

Source: National Housing Federation, Rural Life Monitor 2024.

Only **9% of homes in rural England** are classified as affordable housing, as opposed to **19% in urban areas.**

Source: English Rural, *The Provision of Affordable Rural Housing*, 2025.



Raise our voice for the overlooked problems of rural life

Rural communities have a strong sense of identity, but they are facing challenges which are often overlooked. From old housing stock and limited access to services, to digital exclusion and fewer opportunities for work or training, these issues require a joined-up approach and a refocussing of resources to address.

Connexus is committed to working with our partners and those in our local communities to invest in homes, champion rural fairness, and create opportunities for people of all ages that help rural communities not just to survive, but to thrive.

What we will do

- **Push for fairer funding** that recognises the higher costs and logistical challenges of delivering affordable housing and support services in rural locations.
- **Work with other rural housing associations and partner organisations** on key research to highlight the lack of investment in rural affordable housing and what can be done to rebalance investment into rural areas.
- **Create opportunities for local people** to learn valuable skills and gain employment through apprenticeships in trades and other non-vocational roles.
- **Become a great employer** that is well regarded for its colleague offer, benefits and career opportunities.
 - **Champion rural digital inclusion** by supporting access to broadband and easy to use digital services for customers.
 - **Support sustainable community initiatives** by working with our partners

to provide investment, equipment or skills to people of all ages.

- **Where investment in existing homes isn't viable, we will have a plan** and talk honestly to our stakeholders about the options we can take, which may involve rebuilding some homes, or selling them and reinvesting the proceeds into more modern affordable housing.

In return we need

- **An understanding that some old homes will not be financially viable** for Connexus to bring up to modern standards, and a different approach may be needed which makes best use of the money we have.
- **Rural housing associations and partners to collaborate with us** on critical research aimed at exploring underinvestment in rural affordable housing. By pooling expertise and data, we can build a compelling case for fairer distribution of funding which would rebalance investment across rural areas.
- **Support from local institutions** to offer a broader range of apprenticeships, courses and qualifications in



rural education settings, helping people from across our areas access skills and training without needing to relocate or travel long distances.

- **A continued commitment to apprenticeships** through the Growth and Skills Levy, with specific consideration given to the upskilling required to support the housing professionalism agenda.
- **Colleagues and those we work alongside promoting the benefits** of working for and alongside Connexus through personal recommendations, and by documenting and sharing positive experiences.
- **Further improvements in mobile phone coverage, broadband connectivity and EV charging infrastructure**, with plans to work with housing associations to make sure affordable options reach everyone.
- **A collaborative approach with our partners** which supports good corporate social responsibility, delivering outreach work, sharing skills, or providing equipment for the benefit of local communities.

This will help us to

Invest appropriately in new and existing homes, create opportunities for those living in our local communities, and create connected places and spaces that are vibrant and sustainable.

What the data tells us...

Over a third of rural UK residents are likely to consider moving to a town or city in the next 12 months due to poor connectivity, limited job opportunities or inadequate services.

Source: Virgin Media O2 study, 2024.

An estimated 17.5% of the population in England live in rural areas. The rural population is **growing at a slower rate** and is **aging faster** as younger people (17-20) are migrating to urban areas for education and training opportunities.

Source: UK Parliament Horizon Scanning, *Issues facing rural communities*, 2024.

Between 2019 and 2024, **18% of rural bus routes in England were lost**, creating increasing transport deserts in rural areas.

Source: The Guardian, 2025.

As of 1 April 2025, there were **10,239** public electric vehicle charging devices in rural locations and **55,543** public electric vehicle charging devices in urban locations in England.

This equates to **15.5% of devices being in rural locations** and **84.3% in urban locations**.

Source: Question for Department for Transport, UIN HL7594, House of Lords, tabled on 19 May 2025.



Lead from the front in the stakes for our future

Delivering change in the rural areas we operate in relies on trust and building strong local relationships. We're committed to working openly and collaboratively with those in our communities, listening to our customers and engaging with local leaders and other key stakeholders.

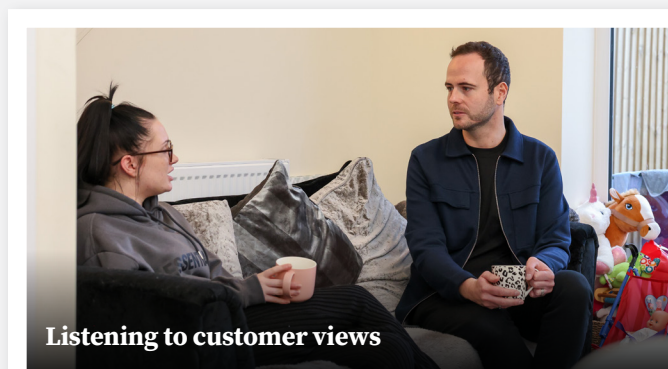
By building partnerships and jointly championing rural issues, we will lead from the front in the stakes for our future and create impact where it is needed most.

What we will do

- **Create effective engagement opportunities** and listening events to give our customers and local stakeholders a genuine say in decision making at Connexus, while being realistic, open and honest about what we can achieve.
- **Actively campaign with sector representative bodies** and local/national leaders on affordable housing and issues affecting our rural communities, including the rurality premium and unequal access to goods and services.
- **Work to understand what local politicians are trying to achieve**, explore synergies, help shape policy, and collaborate on joint initiatives which benefit Connexus, our communities, and our customers.

- **Invite local stakeholders** to Connexus sites across our portfolio, so they can see the work the organisation is doing first hand and learn about how it benefits those living locally.

- **Share the positive impact of the work Connexus does**



through regular news updates, and by attending and facilitating events and forums.

In return we need

- **Honest conversations that build trust**, and a desire to work with Connexus to jointly work through issues.
- **Stronger ties with other rural housing associations** and more regular coordinated campaigning.
- **Politicians to work with us openly** to identify where Connexus could help or add value and insight to

upcoming campaigning, policy debates or draft legislation, focusing on issues impacting rural communities.

- **Peers and wider stakeholders to share the positive impact** Connexus and other rural housing associations make in their area.
- **Our partners working with us to explore mutually beneficial publicity opportunities** which demonstrate joint working or coordinated action.

This will help us to

Build trust, influence, and a feeling of shared momentum which is needed to deliver change in our rural communities.



Help make our Rural Voice heard

Whether you're a partner, policy maker, community leader or local resident, you can help us to deliver the change our rural communities need.

Here's how you can get involved:

- Use Rural Voice to start a conversation with those you work with, live with or represent
- Comment on and share **#RuralVoice** posts by following **@weareconnexus** on social media
- Talk to us about how you can help deliver on the commitments we need from our partners, or help us to achieve our own Rural Voice aims
- Visit a development or regeneration site to see building work taking place, or visit one of our support schemes to see how we are supporting our local communities
- Spend time with Connexus colleagues and learn about the challenges of delivering housing and other services in a rural setting.

If you would like to support us in campaigning on the themes raised in Rural Voice, or would like to learn more about the services Connexus delivers, please email **communications@connexus-group.co.uk**; or call **03332 31 32 33** and ask to speak to a member of the communications and marketing team.



Our campaigning work

Building on the momentum of *Rural Ambition*, Connexus has continued to speak up for rural communities, making the case for more affordable homes, better opportunities for those living in our areas, and fairer funding to address the growing shortage of homes and services in rural places.

Over the past twelve months, we've welcomed Members of Parliament from across the political spectrum to visit our homes and see our services first-hand. These visits have included new build schemes, supported housing, and specialist developments for younger people - showcasing not just the homes themselves but the difference they are making to the lives of those living in them.

We've also worked to strengthen our relationships with local politicians including councillors, helping to raise

awareness of rural housing issues and highlight where collaboration can unlock new opportunities. Alongside this, we've developed closer ties with other rural housing associations, coming together to share challenges, align messages, and campaign more effectively.

This collective effort has seen Connexus contribute to national campaigns like Rural Housing Week, Starts at Home and National Apprenticeship Week, as well as engaging in other sector events. We've also been invited to represent rural housing issues on the national stage, giving evidence at a recent House of Lords inquiry into social mobility and speaking at conferences to help ensure the rural voice is heard.

There's always more to do. Rural Voice is our framework for turning ambition into action, supporting our Corporate Plan commitment to become a leading voice for rural affordable housing.





www.connexus-group.co.uk

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