



Rural England and Scotland's Rural College Launch Consultation on How to 'Unlock Rural Britain's Digital Potential'

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Consultation to inform comprehensive analysis and research report commissioned by Amazon to help support development of the digital economy in rural Britain

Call for rural businesses, local authorities and community groups to submit views on how to fast-track rural economy into the digital age

New survey findings released today finds that rural SMEs who use e-commerce are more confident about their businesses

Shropshire and Edinburgh – 24 July 2017 – Rural England and Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) have today launched a [consultation](#) focused on how to maximise the potential of the internet and technology to boost the digital economy across the UK and level the urban-rural divide. The rural think tank and academic college have been commissioned by Amazon to invite rural businesses of all sizes and sectors across the UK to [respond to the consultation](#) and help inform new research on how to grow rural Britain's digital economy. Responses will be analysed alongside official statistical data, interviews with key stakeholder groups, and economic analysis.

The report aims to understand:

- How to grow the digital economy in rural areas through e-commerce, exports and productivity gains
- The level of digital skills and capabilities in rural areas and how to further improve them
- What digital business tools and services best support rural businesses
- What enables businesses to successfully relocate from urban to rural areas
- The business sectors emerging in rural areas likely to gain most from digital technology
- The best rural locations to set up a digitally-empowered business.

The report also aims to provide potential policy ideas to drive the growth of the digital economy in rural Britain, bringing together the public and private sector to bring the rural economy into the digital age.

The latest government statistics from the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs show that in 2015/2016, there were 537,000 businesses registered in rural areas across England alone, and those businesses account for 24% of all registered businesses in England and employ a total of 3.5 million people. Businesses based in rural areas of England are also overwhelmingly SMEs. In 2015 88% were micro (up to 9 employees) and another 10% were small (10 to 49 employees). However, currently Gross Value Added (GVA) per workforce job is lower in rural than in urban local authority areas of England. In 2015 that GVA figure was £43,900 in predominantly rural areas, compared with a figure for the whole of England of £49,400.

Brian Wilson, Chair of Directors at independent think tank Rural England, said: "Considerable attention has been paid to the lack of connectivity in rural parts of Britain, and whilst that remains an important issue, we will look more at areas where there's a strong digital infrastructure and how effectively it's being used. The digital economy is critical to the long term prosperity of rural areas. Our evidence-based study, working with key stakeholders and rural businesses across the country, will be the first of its kind and we look forward to understanding how to accelerate growth of the digital economy in rural areas."

New research released today finds significant potential for the rural economy going digital. The [SME Growth Tracker](#), a quarterly report by Capital Economics commissioned by Amazon UK and Enterprise Nation which assesses growth prospects and views of over 1,000 UK SMEs, found that Rural SMEs expect e-commerce revenue to increase by +1.9 per cent over the next 12 months, after it rose by +0.6 per cent over the past year. This revenue growth was stronger than UK SMEs overall, who expected to grow annual revenues +1.7% in next 12 months, up from +0.8% over past year. Whilst the survey also found all UK SMEs are downbeat about conditions for their business in the coming months (-11), the SME Confidence Index score was stronger for rural SMEs (-7) when compared urban SMEs (-12) and inner city SMEs (-15).

Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Rural Business Group, Julian Sturdy MP added: "Rural businesses make an essential contribution both to our rural communities, and to the wider UK economy, which I see every day in my constituency of York Outer. It is therefore essential that government and the private sector work together to support rural enterprise, and ensure that the internet and innovative technology can be used to power fast-paced growth. I look forward to reviewing the findings of this research, and discussing ways in which government can help unlock the digital potential of our rural economy."

"We believe that the digital revolution can create significant growth and job opportunities for the rural economy and bridge the urban-rural divide," said **Doug Gurr, UK Country Manager, Amazon.** "As long as you have a laptop, internet connection and a great product, you can now be local and sell global. We've seen thousands of rural businesses do just that through Amazon Marketplace. We welcome and encourage rural businesses of all shapes and sizes from across rural Britain to participate in this important research project."

The consultation will include qualitative interviews with influential rural organisations, as well as discussions with rural politicians on policy solutions that can deliver a digital rural Britain.

Rural businesses can submit their views to the consultation [here](#) until the beginning of September deadline, with a view of the report being published by the end of this year.

-ENDS-

Notes to editors

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About Rural England C.I.C

Rural England's mission is to build the strength and resilience of rural England by helping to inform and engender better rural policy making. They do this by encouraging informed debate, providing independent research and evidence, supporting informed information exchange and building a network that draws together all those who seek to improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of rural England. For more information, visit <https://rurallengland.org/>.

About Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)

SRUC supports innovation and sustainable development in agriculture and the rural sector in Britain and internationally. It is one of the UK's leading agriculturally-focused higher education institutions, offering a unique blend of research, education and consultancy. SRUC's research and education activities operate from six campuses and eight farms and research centres across Scotland. For more information, visit <https://www.sruc.ac.uk/>.