

Rural Connectivity

I am speaking today on the need for better rural connectivity. For most of our rural residents, accessing essential services still requires the use of a private car. This will not change unless there is a clear commitment from the council to prioritise investment in three key areas that are vital in connecting our increasingly isolated rural communities:

1. Rural Buses

Life in a rural village is no longer sustainable without personal transport, and I have had to say goodbye to several residents over the past year who have been forced to make the difficult decision to move due to recent bus cuts. Years of underinvestment in buses means that our rural communities are becoming ever more isolated and fragmented, leaving residents facing ongoing challenges in accessing essential services, employment and education.

A reliable bus network is critical to bridge the gap between remote areas and urban centres, ensuring that everyone has access to services, opportunities and amenities.

2. Pavements

In my ward, pavements are the single-most requested piece of infrastructure. The lack of pavements in rural areas directly impacts the safety, mobility and physical health of residents. Providing new pavements, where there are currently none, along with replacing the poor substitute of 'false footways', would improve the lives of many residents who have no other option than to walk along dangerously fast and winding lanes to access their GP, shops, schools and other community facilities, often in a neighbouring village less than a mile away.

Investing in well-maintained pavements is not just a matter of safety; it is also an investment in the very fabric of our communities, fostering social interaction and a sense of community pride.

3. Safe Cycle Routes

I cycled to work from Farmborough to Bath along the A39 for over 10 years, but not everyone is so willing or able to cycle along A-roads, unrestricted lanes and potholed local roads. Investing in designated and well-maintained cycle routes that encourages more residents to adopt cycling as a means of transport, aligns with broader sustainability goals and contributes to the overall health and well-being of our communities.

A network of safe cycle routes connecting rural areas would allow residents to access a wider range of local services, promote physical activity and reduce traffic congestion.

In conclusion, this is not just about enhancing transport and travel options; but fostering accessibility, community well-being, and a sustainable and inclusive future that meets our collective responsibility to combat climate change.

Making a financial commitment to connecting rural areas is a fundamental step towards creating vibrant, resilient and thriving communities. By focusing on improving bus services, pavements, and safe cycle routes now, the benefits will extend far beyond the physical infrastructure; creating opportunities, enhancing safety and fostering stronger, more connected communities for generations to come.

Thank you.