


THE NEED FOR COLLECTIVE WORKING AT THIS TIME



RURAL
SERVICES
NETWORK



This paper sets out the imperatives for rural local authorities over the next five years – and how we can help you ensure those challenges are met.

We support our members by being effective evidence-based lobbyists on financial and non-financial issues affecting rural local authorities, while also supporting members in their 'day jobs'.

We have four key areas of work:

- Representation of the rural position
- Rural Networking Service
- Rural Research Service
- Wide Range of Rural Community links

REPRESENTATION

Their diverse spread across England makes it vital that rural local authorities have a collective voice to successfully influence the decision-making processes which affect them.

Faced with some of the most severe public sector cutbacks this country has ever seen, it is more vital than ever that the rural voice is heard.

We provide the following services:

1. RESPONDING TO GOVERNMENT AND OTHER KEY CONSULTATIONS

For your views to be heard, they have to be expressed. We make this easier for you – appreciating that many local authorities don't always have the capacity to respond to government consultations, even though they would like to.

We ensure that:

(a) relevant consultations are highlighted in our monthly "opportunities" e-bulletin so all important consultations – and their deadlines – can be found in one place.

(b) local authorities are supplied with a suggested draft response, highlighting the rural perspective, which they can use as a basis for their own response.

(c) all significant government consultations are answered with a collective response on behalf of all our members – again arguing the case on behalf of rural authorities.

Rural authorities can build on this base. It is important for you to have your say to ensure that your voice and interests are represented.

2. REPRESENTING THE RURAL CASE IN PARLIAMENT

We ensure rural local authorities have a voice in Parliament.

MPs have the power to change things for the better. With a finely balance government and a general election in the near future, it is in MPs' own interests to ensure that their rural constituents are properly represented.

We work hard to maximise the opportunities that this affords by providing the following services on behalf of our members:-

(a) An All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services, for which we provide the Secretariat. Meeting five times a year to examine a range of rural issues, the APPG works involves 60 parliamentarians from all parties and both houses.

(b) A Rural Fair Shares Group of 70+ rural MPs covering Local Government, Emergency Services, Health and Housing. This group continues to campaign for improvements in the rural financial position from government ministers.

3. PACKAGING THE RURAL CASE

Like you, we firmly believe rural areas deserve a better deal. To strengthen the argument on behalf of local government, we work with all service providers – from health to housing, transport, education and others – to get the rural message across.

We are therefore able to present both the individual and the global case to help others understand the gravity of the rural situation – always backing up our views by well-researched and presented evidence.

4. MONITORING

When it comes to local government finance, we monitor the rural position through its various classifications to produce an in-depth comparative analysis with the urban position and the English average.

As the system of government funding evolves, potentially entwining with business rate income, the ability to monitor the position whether in direct monetary terms, per head, or per dwelling becomes even more vital.

Even if looked at from the view of merely maintaining the status quo, tracking the position in this way is essential. But these comparisons are also key in providing the evidence aimed at improving the rural position.

5. SERVICE GROUPINGS

Many local authorities no longer run a local strategic partnership but remain keen to retain less formal links with the various organisations that were involved.

We help our members achieve this through the Rural Services Partnership (RSP) – groupings of rural organisations. These include rural housing associations (the Rural Housing Alliance); health organisations, (the Rural Health Network); fire services; and a group looking at crime and community safety issues in rural areas (the Rural Crime Network).

Serving both local authorities and other public service providers in this way ensures our members benefit from working closely with these organisations; bringing the sectors together to learn from each other.

6. RESULTS

Our work has resulted in a number of successes – even though we are arguing for a greater share of an ever decreasing fund central government.

Increased sparsity payments and fixed cost allowances have contributed to a financial gain of more £300,000 per annum for our average member this year alone.

We believe there is more to come.

By working together, local authorities stand to benefit further from our work – helping to secure a fairer settlement on behalf of the communities they serve.

NETWORKING

Joint and collective working is increasingly important in an era when local authority workforces are forecast to fall by one third over eight years.

Our network extends to some 22,000 people involved in the delivery of services that support rural communities. It is one of the strongest and most comprehensive networks in place to support local authorities.

Our members benefit further from our contacts with service providers outside local government – and the 9,000 community contacts in our community group.

Ours is a comprehensive rural hub – and it can be yours too.

We are creating an e-network for local government officers. Starting with environmental health, we have already

signed up finance, performance and improvement officers across 61 rural local authorities.

Our network provides a specific rural thread that complements existing professional networks. Our members are able to share experiences and best practice with others in the same circumstances facing the same challenges.

This encourages networking across professional sectors, reducing silo working and resulting in better service provision – as well as encouraging new initiatives.

RESEARCH

There is a clear need for independent rural research. With the demise of the Commission for Rural Communities, an independent critical voice has been lost.

The suggestion that now because of the financial climate, rural research should be solely from a government source and undertaken by DEFRA's Rural Communities Policy Unit is a worrying one.

Rural community analysis is not an area commonly sought out through British universities and colleges – yet that independent analysis would be useful.

In conjunction with other rural organisations – and with a group of former commissioners from the Commission for Rural Communities, we are conducting research into a number of critical areas through our 'Rural England' service.

We have already established a library of good rural practice, an annual survey of rural services operation, an annual research report, and a rural research panel so we can conduct surveys into prominent rural issues.

RURAL COMMUNITY LINKAGE

To ensure the rural voice is heard, it is vital that as many people as possible have the opportunity to voice their thoughts and views on rural issues as they occur. We deliver this through our network of forums and by structured 'Calls for Evidence'.

Your membership also ensures that local councils in your area, local schools, the Citizens Advice Bureaux and interested rural small businesses are involved in the appropriate areas of our Community Network.



INTELLIGENCE

We provide the most comprehensive rural news service in England. We provide our members with tailored e-newsletters twice a week and our professional network is building on the widening of that service.

Our website www.rsnonline.org.uk has a targeted webpage for each of the 118 member local authorities. In this area, we provide a range of statistical information specially analysed by us for the local authority in question.

We also provide statistical analysis of RO and RA Financial information, and performance indicator analysis for

areas such as recycling, development management and housing.

This information is given in comparison graphs allowing easy monitoring against County, Rural Classification and National levels.

Officers are able to discuss and learn from each other how certain service goals have been achieved – and the challenges that have been encountered and overcome, and their impact on authority performance.

This indeed is networking for real.

In order that rural local authorities can continue to deliver effective and efficient services to their communities, collective working supported by the Rural Services Network is vital.



If you would like further information
about the Rural Services Network
or to join please contact us:

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