


THE NEED FOR  
**COLLECTIVE WORKING**  
AT THIS TIME



RURAL  
SERVICES  
NETWORK



Putting back the pieces the cuts have taken away.

Policy, Performance, Financial Evaluation, Rural Life, Economic Development, Housing, Community Safety, Health, Community Planning.

This paper seeks to set out what we consider are the real imperatives for the next five years in rural areas.

To support our member authorities we are effective lobbyists (supported by evidence) in respect of issues,

both financial and non financial, that affect their authorities and we are also support 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

Rural areas are spread diversely around England. This does not assist in establishing any collective rural voice and generally rural areas have been unable to influence decision making processes which affect them. In urban areas, because of the natural identity in larger communities, the opposite occurs and tracking of suggested changes by decision makers and their impact on the communities involved happens far more instinctively. When faced with the most severe cut backs ever this is a really serious, perhaps even dangerous, situation.

We provide the following services:

## 1. REPLYING TO GOVERNMENT AND OTHER KEY RURAL CONSULTATION

We appreciate there is a cynicism about consultation and people may not have the capacity to respond individually to all of the relevant consultations however, if views or concerns are not expressed there can be no expectation of change to any proposal not liked. In fact it may change to your further detriment due to others registering their opposing interest.

We ensure:

(a) that relevant consultations gets broadcast on our monthly “opportunities” e-bulletin so that people only need to see one publication to establish current consultations and their deadlines.

(b) that, in respect of important (in the rural context) consultations we publish a draft response suggested by our interpretation of the rural position so

that people, under pressure, can use that response if they so wish as a basis for their own response.

(c) that we make sure that every significant consultation is answered with a collective response on behalf of our members taking our view of the rural perspective.

Rural organisations 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 have built up in Parliament the following services:

(a) An All Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services for which we provide the Secretariat. We have 5 meetings a year looking at a range of rural issues. Each presenter is asked to provide one single specific rural output they seek from Parliamentarians. The APPG works from a pool of 60 members from both Houses of Parliament and they come from all parties.

(b) A Rural Fair Shares Grouping of 70+ rural MPs covering Local Government, Emergency Services, Health and Housing. The style here is a campaigning one where improvement in the rural financial position is sought in a targeted way to Government Ministers.

Unlike other classifications (particularly those related to work areas) MPs can understand and represent rural considerations because of the overall nature of their own constituencies. It is

in their own interest to seek to represent those overall interests. We work hard to take advantage of this.

### 3. PACKAGING THE RURAL CASE

In order to persuade people that rural is getting a bad deal, we have to take from time to time, a cross service overview and show the global picture whilst also representing the individual case. As an illustration, it would be impossible to achieve a sizeable grouping of MPs coming together to argue an individual service case. The RSN works with all service providers and this strengthens our arguments on behalf of Local Government.

We therefore present both the individual and the global case to help others understand the gravity of the rural situation and back up our views by well researched and presented evidence.

### 4. MONITORING

One of the most important exercises we undertake in respect of local government finance is to monitor the rural position through its various classifications and produce analysis with the urban position and the English average. As the system changes with potentially more 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. If we are to improve the position those comparisons are key but even if looked at from the view of merely maintaining the status quo tracking the position in this way is essential.

### 5. SERVICE GROUPINGS

Through the Rural Services Partnership (RSP), we are creating groups of Rural

Organisations, similar to the way we grouped rural local authorities in the past. The RSP includes groups of rural Housing Associations; (The Rural Housing Alliance), Health organisations; (Rural Health Network); Fire Services; and a group looking at crime and community safety issues in rural areas (Rural Crime Network). A lot of authorities no longer run a Local Strategic Partnership but remain keen to retain less formal links with the various organisations that were involved. Because of the way we are structured serving both local authorities and other public service providers and the way we are growing interest groups we can readily offer a clear opportunity for authorities to benefit from working closer to these organisations; bringing the sectors together to learn from each other.

### 6. RESULTS

We recognise that we are arguing for a greater share of an ever decreasing fund in so far as central government funding is concerned. However the work we have undertaken has resulted in a number of successes in relation to fixed cost allowance and increased sparsity payments. For some this has been a financial gain through ESSSA in this current financial year. This all constitutes to over £300,000 per annum for our average member. The reality is however that if local authorities do not continue to support our organisation and benefit from our work, our influence will evaporate in favour of those who continue to argue their own particular viewpoint.

# NETWORKING

Our network covers approximately 22,000 people involved in delivering rural services and supporting rural communities.

It is forecast that by 2018 Local Authority workforces will have decreased by a third from their 2010 levels. Local Authorities will be increasingly dependent on joint and collective working. We recognise that there is a need to ensure that there are the strongest and most comprehensive networks in place to support local authorities.

We are in a key position to support local authorities in this situation and we have contacts not only across similar rural authorities but also with service providers outside local government and equally importantly with the 9,000 community contacts in the Community Group of which you are a member.

We are creating a comprehensive rural hub.

We are incrementally creating an e-network for local government officers. We started with Environmental Health and have added performance and improvement officers and finance officers with 61 currently involved across rural local authorities. We recognise that officers will have existing professional networks as a resource but our network provides a specific rural thread so that officers can share experiences and best practice with others in the same circumstances facing the same challenges. This will enable them to network across professional sectors, reducing silo working and resulting in better ways of working.

The development of this network takes time and is being grown in a structured manner. Local authority officer numbers are decreasing significantly and we want to be able to provide the rural sounding board that they need to develop new initiatives and ways of delivering services efficiently.

We provide the most comprehensive rural news service in England with e-newsletters twice a week and the professional network will be created from the widening of that service.

Our website [www.rsnonline.org.uk](http://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 analysed for the local authority. 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. We envisage that the networking system becomes central to this work as officers are able to discuss and learn from each other how certain service goals have been able to be achieved, and what service problems have been encountered and their impact on the performance of the authority.

This indeed is networking for real.

## RESEARCH

There is a clear need for some independent rural research to be undertaken and 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 within the Rural Communities Policy Unit in DEFRA is a worrying one. Rural community analysis is not an area commonly sought out through British Universities and Colleges however independent analysis would be useful.

In conjunction with other rural organisations and with a group of former Commissioners from the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), all of whom are providing their services on a voluntary basis we have agreed to cover some research areas which might have previously fallen to the Commission under a 'Rural England' service.

Clearly we can only undertake a small cross section of the work undertaken by the CRC but we would like to tackle some work in all 12 areas. Among these are a library of good rural practice, an annual survey of rural services operation,

an annual research report, Heart of the Village research, and a rural panel or sounding board allowing surveys of opinion on prominent rural issues. If possible we would like to see an annual Rural England conference. Our ambitions in this area will be governed by how successful we can be in obtaining private sector sponsorship. Any money from the RSN pot can only be for seed corn funding.

We will also seek to work with private sector consultants, the three Universities in England who have the greatest coverage of rural issues in their curricula and ACRE. This would be to create a Rural Evidence Exchange operation to collate and where possible update rural evidence which is in danger of being lost with the closure of the Commission and the RDA's, and the financial pressure on Regional and County observatories. RSN has its own observatory area running through the rsnonline website and we would wish to extend our own service into this wider arrangement.



# RURAL COMMUNITY LINKAGE

Your authorities main membership ensures the local councils in your area, the local schools, the Citizens Advice Bureaux and interested rural small businesses can be involved in the appropriate areas of the service free of charge in this our Community Network. It is vital at a really difficult time to enable as many people involved with local organisations to have the opportunity to voice their thoughts and views on issues as they occur. We will deliver this through the network

of forums and by structured 'Calls for Evidence'. We wish to extend this Community area to cover local Village Hall Committees, other local voluntary organisations and linkage into local or parish newspapers.

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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