

**MINUTES OF THE SPARSE RURAL AND RURAL SERVICES NETWORK EXECUTIVE,  
MONDAY 13<sup>th</sup> MARCH 2017 HELD AT CITY OF WESTMINSTER ARCHIVES CENTRE,  
10 ST ANN'S STREET, LONDON**

**Present:** - Cllr Cecilia Motley (Chairman), Cllr Janet Duncton, Cllr Peter Thornton, Cllr Peter Stevens, Cllr Gordon Nicolson OBE, Revd Richard Kirlew

**Officers:** - Graham Biggs MBE (Chief Executive), David Inman (Director), Andy Dean (Assistant Director)

**Apologies:-** Cllr Robert Heseltine (First Vice Chairman), Cllr Derrick Haley, Cllr Philip Sanders, Cllr Adam Paynter, Cllr Lewis C Strange, Cllr Sue Sanderson, John Birtwistle (First Group), Kayleigh Wainwright (UK Youth), Kerry Booth RSN

**1. Notes of Previous Executive Meeting**

Agreed as a correct record with Cllr Peter Thornton added to the Minutes.

**2. Notes of Last Main Meeting Monday 30<sup>th</sup> January 2017**

Agreed mainly as a correct record. Amendment of mistake in Minute 10, delete Executive and insert Rural Assembly.

**3. Budget**

Position as detailed by Graham Biggs. The Report was accepted – it was regarded as a relatively healthy budget situation. Graham detailed the Service Level Agreement position concerning the NRCN Service Level Agreement where some uncertainty existed.

Membership under the two RSN's headings now stood at a total of 147.

**4. Communication Strategy**

The Lexington Report was accepted by the Executive.

In future there would be three types of Press Release:

- (1) **Strategic/Campaigns** – prepared in conjunction with Lexington. There may be one or two of these each year - targeted particularly at the nationals. There was provision in the budget of £6000a year for this.
- (2) **Periodic** – eight a year full releases in conjunction with Johann Tasker contract on a topic of particular relevance.
- (3) **Reactive Pieces** – one, brief comment piece stating the RSN position, through Johann Tasker at least every fortnight to make the network's presence felt more frequently.
- (4) **Specific Local Government Press Releases** – targeted at the Municipal Journal and the LGA First Magazine. Again, Johann Tasker would be employed.

In each case (other than Reactive) Councils' Media Officers would be given the release on a 'not for publication before' basis circa 24 hours before release so they aware of the issue in case they are contacted and also asked to use in their own local context. Each of the Press Releases would in future, as recommended by Lexington, include at the bottom the relevant piece outlining the key strategic message behind the RSN's position.

Additionally each Press Release would include the list of Authorities in membership by "Region" and the email address of the Authorities' media contact would be included...

The position would need discussion with Johann to make sure a consistent situation was achieved.

The Executive looked at what Lexington was offering. It was decided to buy the list of media contacts, which it was understood were established in relevant sections. It was also decided to buy the updating services for this list but only updating once a year.

The 'Audit of Events' and the 'Calendar of Facts' would not be purchased but we would try to replicate something internally through Kerry.

The 4 suggested key messages were agreed.

It was decided that Johann needed to fulfil a far more proactive multi- media role in terms of the Rural Conference and this would be discussed with him.

The whole Communication Strategy to be reviewed in 12 months' time to assess effectiveness

## **5. LG Finance Settlement**

Graham Biggs detailed the situation which revolved around the four year settlement.

The Rural MPs had had a lengthy discussion with the Secretary of State who had agreed that the current position was inequitable to rural Local Authorities. He had assured the MPs that the situation would be rectified during the transformation to a Business Rate driven system, aspects of which he had agreed were now being brought forward to the 2019/2020 settlement. He had pointed out that in the LG consultation in relation to the 4 year settlement, 97% of Authorities in replying to the accepting the settlement and submitting their 4 year strategies showing how they could cope with the position..

Given this position, the Rural MPs advised:

- (a) That they concentrate on monitoring the needs assessment work and on the promised 19/20 changes.
- (b) The Local Authorities themselves petition Government and their MPs in a common letter prepared in the summer and lodged in the autumn of 2017.

(The MPs indicated that the absence of Local Authority lobbying of them over the 17/18 settlement had led them to not challenging the final settlement more robustly).

## **6. Update on 'Vulnerability' discussion with Water and Energy deliverers/providers.**

A series of exploratory meetings had been held on this one to see whether it was possible to form a group of Rural England supporters from the Power and Water industries who would work with RSN and Rural England on the questions arising from Vulnerability/Safeguarding and the Priority Services Register.

It was proving challenging to try to establish a common position as the work areas had evolved in different ways. However the discussions were continuing and a further meeting was due on Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> March.

## **7. Update on Brexit discussions held on 20<sup>th</sup> February with CCN and DCN**

The general position was detailed by Graham Biggs. Executive members emphasised the need to establish the global figure of how much Rural Areas received from Europe currently so that a true plumb line could be established. Officers commented on this and although different figures might be achieved from differing viewpoints – the importance of this particular exercise was accepted.

Cllr Nicolson reported that Eden was trying to establish such a figure in respect of its District. He agreed he would keep RSN informed both in respect of the amount and the various components which had been applied to establish it. Obviously, if such methodology could be achieved all Authorities in RSN could be encouraged to undertake a similar exercise.

## **8. Agendas for forthcoming meetings:**

### **(a) Rural Social Care, Health and Vulnerability Committee**

This committee was designed to involve particularly Unitary and County Councils in some ways, although District/Borough Councils in RSN Membership could be members of this Committee, therefore it was a replacement for the Unitary Group initiative. Due to the County/Unitary Council elections, it was felt prospective members might be unable to give the first meeting's initiative the attention it deserved. It had been decided therefore to not proceed on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April but to introduce the Committee at the AGM meeting in November.

It was decided that in terms of reporting lines the Committee would report to the Rural Assembly.

### **(b) The Rural Assembly on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April would commence at 11.30 a.m. Items would include SORS, Vulnerability, Brexit, Panels and Sounding Boards.**

### **(c) The Sparse Rural meeting on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July would be in conference style, involving representative Councillors but also Finance Officers and Finance Portfolio Holders.**

## **9. Total involvement of all rural areas in England in the work of the Rural Services Network.**

The work of the Commission for Rural Communities and the Countryside Agency obviously had involved and been relevant to all rural areas no matter in which Local Authorities they were situated.

Somehow, as there was no longer any Commission for Rural Communities or Countryside Agency (or indeed LGA Rural Commission) there was a need to involve as many Local Authorities as possible in supporting the important work of the RSN. The difficulty was that unlike the Commission and the Countryside Agency, involvement had to equate to a financial input of some size by the Authority. This was the task in hand.

It was agreed the exercise would involve all Authorities who had over 20 rural output areas or more than 3,000 rural residents. (Tables were presented to members together with an indication of the amount being sought for Network support in accordance with the established charging structures).

It was felt that an approach signed by all Local Authority members of the Executive, giving their email address and phone number would be best - making it as informal as it could be.

Members looked at the proposed documentation and were generally happy with it. However, they felt that boxes showing RSN achievements to date and further targets that could be achieved if the financial support scheme set out could be established.

The work involved would be attempted over 12 months in ten defined tranches of approach. Documentation, it was agreed, would be varied to meet local circumstances.

Those being approached would be given two options:

- (a) Joining now to support the initiative immediately.
- (b) Taking advantage of free involvement for 12 months after which invoicing of the appropriate amount would take place, unless at a defined previous stage Authorities had indicated that they did not wish to remain involved.

## **10. Business rates retention**

The paper prepared by Pixel Financial Management concerning the latest technical consultation paper on 100% business rate retention was discussed. It was agreed that Pixel would be requested to prepare a short formal response.

The Chief Executive presented information from two PowerPoint presentations given at a recent joint meeting on business rate retention between DCN, CCN and RSN. Copies of these two presentations are attached.

It was noted that the additional resources directed to adult social care, announced in the Chancellor's recent budget, would equate to an additional £18.20 per head in rural areas and £20.06 in urban areas in the first year rising to £67.88 and £70.42 respectively in 2019/20. Due to the complexity of this issue, it was agreed that letters would be written to MPs rather than issuing a press release on this matter.

## **11. Schools funding (F40 Group Briefing Note to MPs)**

It was agreed that a RSN response would be drafted based on the key points raised in the Briefing Note.

## **12. Rural Health Conference**

It was noted that the conference had gone well with a variety of interesting presentations. It had made a small financial loss

### **13. Annual Rural Conference**

It was agreed that the critical themes of health and the economy should be incorporated into the conference and that a wider audience should be encouraged beyond RSN members. Members were requested to submit thoughts on the central theme and potential presentations to enable a draft programme to be developed.

### **14. Industrial Strategy White Paper Briefing Note**

The report was noted and endorsed.