

Attachment A

Note of decisions taken and actions required

Title: SPARSE RURAL Sub SIG AGM
Date and time: 11.30am, 17 November 2014
Venue: Westminster Suite, Local Government House

Attendance:

Cllr Cecilia Motley (Shropshire Council); Cllr Cameron Clark (Sevenoaks DC); Cllr Hilary Carrick (Cumbria CC); Cllr Myles Cullen (Chichester DC); Cllr Gordon Nicolson (Eden DC); Cllr Owen Bierley (West Lindsey DC); Cllr Lewis Strange (Lincolnshire CC); Revd Richard Kirlew (Church in Wales); Cllr Malcolm Leeding (Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils); Cllr Peter Stevens (St Edmundsbury BC); Cllr Lindsey Cawrey (North Kesteven); Cllr Madge Shingleton (Shropshire Council); Cllr Robert Heseltine (North Yorkshire CC); Cllr Rupert Riechhold (ENC); Cllr Roger Begy (Rutland CC); Cllr David Ireton (Craven DC) - standing in for Cllr Richard Foster; Cllr Les Kew (Bath and NE Somerset); Cllr Robert Whiting (Suffolk CC); Cllr Jeremy Savage (South Norfolk DC); Cllr John Savage (Wycombe DC); Cllr Jane March (Tunbridge Wells BC); Cllr Ken Pollock (Worcestershire CC); Cllr Neil Butters (Bath and NE Somerset); Keri Lawrence (Tendring DC); Elizabeth Ridout (Tendring DC); Suzanne Clear (National Union of Farmers); Councillor John Clarke (Gedling); David Wakelin (Gedling); Cllr Rosemary Doyle (Canterbury)

Officers: David Inman (RSN); Graham Biggs (RSN); Dan Bates (RSN); Kerry Booth (RSN); Brian Wilson (RSN) and Andy Dean (RSN)

Apologies for absence:

Cllr Jane Mortimer – Scarborough Borough Council; Cllr Derrick Hayleyh – Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Council; Geoff Holdcroft – Suffolk Coastal District Council; Cllr Philip Sanders – West Devon Borough Council; Cllr Michael Hicks – South Hams District Council
Alex Folkes – Lib Dem Cllr Launceston Central & Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources Cornwall Council; Nigel Williams – Fire Service, Norfolk County Council; David Dickinson – Newark and Sherwood District Council; Cllr Mary Robinson – Eden District Council (Cllr Nicolson to attend instead); Cllr Yvonne Bendle – South Norfolk District Council (Cllr Jeremy Savage will attend instead); Cllr Alan Rhodes – Nottinghamshire County Council; Cllr Jennifer Mein – Lancashire County Council; Cllr Richard Foster – Craven District Council (Cllr David Ireton will attend instead); Margaret Squires – Mid-Devon District Council; Cllr R J Phillips – Herefordshire Council; Cllr David Walsh – North Dorset District Council & Dorset County Council; Cllr Carole Clarke – South Northamptonshire Council; Cllr Hayden Phillips – North Warwickshire Borough Council; Cllr David Worden – North Devon Council

Decisions and actions

Apologies for absence

Apologies were noted and would appear in the minutes.

Minutes of the last full meeting – 14 July 2014

The minutes the last full meeting were agreed.

1. Election of Chairman for the ensuing year

Cllr Cecilia Motley was agreed as the Chairman for the coming year.

2. Election of Vice Chairmen for the ensuing year

It was **agreed** that the following Vice Chairs would remain in post:

Cllr CL Strange - Lincolnshire
Cllr R Begy - Rutland
Cllr G Nicholson - Eden
Cllr R Heseltine - North Yorkshire
Cllr P Stevens - St Edmundsbury
Cllr P Thornton - South Lakeland

Without Portfolio:

Cllr H Carrick - Cumbria
Cllr D Haley - Mid Suffolk

Members highlighted that there was currently no formal Vice Chair representation for the East of England. It was agreed that Cllr Stevens would take on this role.

Action

It was decided to enquire of Cornwall who their representative should be since Cllr Folkes who had been the South West Vice Chair had left their cabinet. The Executive would then appoint a Vice Chair from the South West.

David Inman / Graham Biggs

3. Election of First Vice Chair

Cllr Robert Heseltine was agreed as the First Vice Chair for the coming year.

4. Constitution

Graham Biggs highlighted paragraph 8.3 of the constitution that the provisions

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relating to position of the Chairman of the RSN and the Rural Assembly Sub Group be applicable from the 2014 AGM. He suggested that the date was changed to 2015 to ensure structural consistency in the run-up to the general election and this was agreed by members.

While members were broadly in agreement on the content of the constitution, members commented that Melton Borough Council had previously expressed a concern. Graham Biggs responded that the council had been contacted in March and had been provided assurances. However, it was agreed that as the constitution had to be put to a ballot Melton still had an opportunity to indicate if they did not wish to see the proposed changes go ahead and the reasons they held this view.

Action

The new constitution go out to postal ballot and the results be reported to the April meeting.

5. Fairer Funding Campaign

Dan Bates gave a verbal update on the latest position with regards to the Fairer Funding Campaign.

On the Government's evaluation of the rural funding gap, Dan said that he had seen a draft copy of the results but because the RSN was part of the Steering Group for the work and the report had not yet been made public, he could only give broad advice about the research.

On this DCLG and DEFRA commissioned research by LG Futures to investigate the comparative costs for delivering services for rural authorities, Dan said 30 rural and urban authorities had taken part and the conclusions were now going to the minister. There is enough in the results to suggest that discretion could be applied on sparsity. Graham Biggs had written to the Minister with some suggestions on the position. This letter would be circulated when the confidential period had ended.

Graham Biggs had responded to a letter from the Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hilary Benn. Mr Benn's letter seemed to indicate that the focus of a Labour government might swing back towards urban areas if elected.

Members were invited by the Chairman to ask questions.

Members asked if it was worth looking at increasing council tax beyond the election. Graham Biggs responded that setting council tax levels was a matter for individual authorities rather than for the group. Dan added that the group could look to provide some general information to Government to evidence that current policy was further forcing rural authorities to use council tax limits.

Following a comment on money which had been removed as a result of formula changes, Graham agreed that councils should have got this money pre-damping. While post-damping money was made available, damping and other changes had still wiped out a high proportion of the gains from the improved formulae. However, he said that so many changes around the rural formula had

taken place that it was now impossible to recalculate remaining pre-damping money owed retrospectively. Hence, the RSN have returned to arguing for the pre-damping sum to be introduced.

Members commented on the new burden of community value. While cost was unlikely to be treated separately over the next few years, there was a risk that authorities could lose that money if it were not treated separately.

Graham replied that the problem with the new burden was its obscurity. He advised members in authorities affected to keep track of costs to allow RSN to see if there were other authorities in the same position. Dan added that the RSN was looking to build on evidence suggesting that new burdens do not have a pro-rata effect.

Members asked what the political consequences of maintaining the status quo on council tax would be. Dan highlighted the table at the bottom of page 12 of the document pack. He said that the Government tend to quote spending powers while hiding how these are made up. He said that the comparative percentages of money from the taxpayer and from the Government would be outlined in the RSN's summary of local authorities' spending powers.

On Community asset legislation, some members indicated that the Government were giving grants to some authorities regarding neighbourhood planning.

Decision

Members **agreed** the Local Government Funding section of the manifesto.

6. Performance

Kerry Booth gave a presentation on the RSN's performance benchmarking. She said that RSN's performance benchmarking service now included unitary authorities and allowed users to compare like with like in relation to other similar authorities as oppose to just other rural or unitary authorities.

In response to a question from Cllr Motley, she confirmed that RSN would update the website on a quarterly basis.

7. Rural Broadband

Matt Smith, on behalf of the Rural Unitaries Group, updated the RSN on the latest situation regarding rural broadband.

Graham Biggs highlighted that at present, any broadband in rural areas had to be funded in large part by rural authorities with costs being much higher in rural areas to reach the same number of residents. This was another cost burden which urban authorities did not have to meet.

The following points were made in discussions:

The Government is increasingly moving online to save costs. However, they are not paying significant attention to the roll out or the huge potential savings it

could offer to services such as adult social care, with increased telecare delivery.

Suffolk has been awarded money to get fibre optic cabling in place by 2015 and is the first county to sign an agreement with BT. However, they accept that the strong relationship to date may be influenced by the location of BT's technology and research labs in the county. Other authorities reported that BT's relationship with them had not always been as productive, with caution urged regarding the figures they quoted on coverage.

Some members also raised concerns about BT acting as the sole contractor and emphasised that phases 2 and 3 would need to include a wider range of technologies. However, Matt responded that he couldn't see any wireless providers being able to deliver under current state aid restrictions.

Members noted that in farming communities, resources were needed to help people use the internet as well as access it.

Several members felt that the Government was not being told the truth on the number of "not" spots and the length of time it would take as the message was being stifled by providers. Some said that BT would not tell them what the uptake figures were. BT's capacity to deliver was also questioned, with the amount of resources to undertake the scale of the project in doubt.

Matt responded that local authorities needed to be steadfast in making sure contracts are delivered. On capacity, he said that this is already causing service and equipment delays in other parts of the business.

Members suggested that the current delivery of broadband created a false impression as providers cherry-picked the easiest projects in the first instance.

On data transparency, Matt said that there were issues affecting Councils' ability to let communities know what, when and where work would take place.

Business parks were also discussed, with Members highlighting that a number were not included in delivery plans as they inherently have low business volumes

Matt felt there might be advantage in the group having a group of Economic Development Officers who could assist in pursuing issues of this nature. The officers agreed to consider his remarks .

Decision

Members **agreed** that the Chairman and RSN Officers approve a final version of the broadband proposal included in the draft Manifesto, incorporating comments from the discussion.

Action

Officers to finalise following consultation with the Chairman.

Cllr Motley thanked all for attending and closed the meeting.



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NEXT MEETING 13TH APRIL 2015

