**Report to the Executive on 'Going Forward' for
The Rural Services Network
19 January 2015**

Background

We currently have 125 authorities in membership of SPARSE and 24 authorities who are general rural members and who with the SPARSE members form part of the Rural Assembly. Our rural coverage of England is shown in rural output terms on the two maps showing the current County/Unitary position and the District position. Rural areas are spread throughout England and our aim is to bring all of those areas together so that we are able to represent the whole of rural England, providing a comprehensive voice for rural communities across the country. The details in this report should assist us in our aim to involve all councils in rural areas.

The Issue

There are a number of rural local authorities that are not currently in membership which we would like to target to join our organisation. We feel with an increased involvement this would assist with combined working across rural areas and make the group a very powerful force for rural communities.

Of the Predominantly Rural and Significantly Rural Local Authorities, there are 27 County Councils and we have 16 in membership which leaves 11 not in membership. There are 5 unitary authorities not currently in membership and there are 32 District authorities that are not in membership.

These are:
* = Previously in membership

County	Unitary	District	
		Predominantly Rural	Significantly Rural
Dorset* Cambridgeshire* Warwickshire Gloucestershire Surrey Buckinghamshire Kent Derbyshire Leicestershire Northamptonshire Hertfordshire	Bedford Central Bedfordshire* South Gloucestershire West Berkshire Wiltshire*	High Peak South Buckinghamshire Staffordshire Moorlands Test Valley Waverley Copeland* Carlisle* East Dorset* Rushcliffe West Berkshire	Amber Valley Basingstoke & Deane Bolsover Brentwood Chiltern Colchester Dacorum East Staffordshire Eastleigh Epping Forest Fylde Great Yarmouth Hart Hertsmere Kettering Maidstone Mole Valley North Hertfordshire

			South Derbyshire
			St Albans
			Swale
			Wyre

Progress to date

Historically we have tried on numerous occasions to approach these authorities through discussing the financial benefits to be gained by lobbying for better financial outcomes for rural areas together. This has been unsuccessful and given that local authorities are currently facing drastic cuts in their already small budgets, it is difficult to entice them into membership.

Authorities being approached will often say that whilst they have sympathy with our rural area arguments and wish us well it is their current policy not to take on further subscription arrangements.

Options for moving forward and growing the organisation

There are two issues that we need to be aware of and considering in our future plans. Local authorities are facing tough decisions about their budgets and have to make savings and we need to be aware of the threat to our organisation of authorities cancelling their subscription with us. In addition, we need to focus on the authorities set out above who are not members and that we aim to bring into some form of involvement with us.

Whilst we may not be able to achieve involvement with the organisation from every single authority in rural areas, our aim is to bring in as many as possible to strengthen the organisation.

Where we cannot convince the principal authority to be involved with us in any way we should then approach directly the local council tier in their area offering a community service for £30.   This is in line with our current practice for parishes where the principle authority is not a member. The administrative burden obviously widens very considerably if we have to do this but it will allow us the potential to seek to engage with all rural areas no matter what view is held by the principal authority.

Through recent developments of our organisation with the growth of the Rural Assembly, greater Sparse membership, the consolidation of our role at the LGA as the Special Interest Group for Rural Services, and of course with the separate development of Rural England as an organisation we are in a stronger position to approach these authorities not in membership.

As the growth agenda is key to all local authorities and particularly with the Business Rates Retention Scheme, promoting links with rural businesses could only help our position with local authorities.

The Rural Services Network would like to be truly able to claim to be representative of the whole of Rural England in the same way that for example the LGA can say it seeks to serve English Local Government.

Recommendations

We therefore recommend a three step approach to the issue of membership:

1. Encouraging non-members to either join in membership at either SPARSE or Assembly status (our preference) or to subscribe to a new Service Level Agreement for rural authorities.
2. Further develop our Rural Services Community Group for existing members, with a particular focus on the Business Community
3. Illustrate the difference between our representative role and best practice work by the development of a separate Rural England website.

These three steps would aim to maximise membership of the organisation and below is further information on them.

1. In the past we have encouraged non members who may benefit from our financial work to join the Sparse group of our organisation to contribute to and to take part in the financial lobbying work. This will continue. However, as a way of bringing them into the organisation to experience some of the benefits of rural networking and to extend our reach to a wider range of rural authorities, we would like to introduce a Service Level Agreement for authorities to receive a very small number of our services. This would take place with a view to increasing their membership in time. The Service Level Agreement would be priced at around £299 and would enable those responsible for Economic Development within authorities to access the e-newsletters and to send delegates onto the subsidised seminar programme. Their communities and schools would also receive free of charge the Community Service as appropriate. These authorities would however not be in membership and there would be no involvement with membership packages.

2. The Rural Services Community is one of the Unique Selling Points of our organisation that makes us different from other Local Authority networks. Parish and Town Councils and Schools form part of our Rural Services Community depending on whether their District or County is in membership.

   We would like to expand this service to include a number of specific Business Panels, for example:
   - Rural Businesses Panel
   - Rural Tourism Business Panel
   - Panel of Rural Chamber of Commerce / Trade Chairs

   The expansion of this grassroots service to support the work of our local authorities would help our organisation remain distinctly separate

from existing principal authority networks such as the County Councils Network or the District Councils Network. It provides us with a cross representational capability which they do not have.

We would also like to work closer with DCN and CCN and plan to meet with them to discuss ways that we could support each other.

3. As the Rural England Organisation develops, we would like to be very specific about the difference between our representational and best practice work, and the research work. This would involve the creation of a separate website for the Rural England research work. It is a Community Interest Company in its own right and should have a separate site to assist with research bids and the development of its work. It would however be prominently linked from rsnonline.org.uk so that for Councils the two areas can be regarded as a comprehensive service.

Conclusion

We have started the process over the last few months of developing the organisation to help safeguard it over the coming years and in particular the budget cuts which will be of high significance in 2015-2016. We would like to expand the Rural Services Network so that it covers as much of the rural areas of England as possible, to truly represent all rural communities and exist therefore as a comprehensive and effective network.