

NOTES OF THE RSN EXECUTIVE OF THURSDAY 7th FEBRUARY 2012.

Present:- Cllr Roger Begy (Chairman) Cllr Cecilia Motley (First Vice Chair) Cllr Robert Heseltine Cllr Gordon Nicholson, Cllr Derek Haley, Cllr Peter Stevens, Cllr JE Stewart; John Birtwistle (Transport) Barbara Shaw (Voluntary Sector), Richard Kirlew (Community)

Officers: - Graham Biggs; David Inman; Dan Bates; Andy Dean.

In attendance:- Timothy Jenkins PA to Neil Parish; Andrew Gill (Weber Shandwick), Neil Benn.

Apologies:- Cllr Betty Harvey; Cllr M Cotterill. Cllr Hilary Carrick, Cllr Nick Worth.

Notes of Previous Meeting.

Minute 1d re a Countryside Round Table re Fuel Poverty. The matter had not yet moved forward. The situation would be discussed with Calor.

Minute 1 e re CCRI. A successful bid (CCRI, Rose Regeneration & RSN) had been made in relation to a brief from Defrere Alternative Means of Service Delivery. The overall contract was worth c£15k to the RSN but most of that would be paid out to those carrying out the additional work involved. It was RSN's first successful involvement in a bid.

Minute 1 i- John Birtwistle updated the Exec on the current position.

1. The 2013/14 and 2014/15 Settlement

The position was discussed at considerable length. The group had been involved in a long campaign which had attracted considerable media attention and support from over 50 Rural MPs. The position remained that in cash terms rural had lost 5% to an urban loss of 3%. The position did not follow through in per capita terms (where there was a slight – 0.2% closure of the urban v rural gap) because of a London census growth of 500,000 people but it did reflect in per dwelling calculations.

The work had secured a work years' worth of extra funding through a special grant entitled Efficiency Support for Sparse Areas. Initially this had been a flat rate payment seemingly based on population or dwellings throughout Predominantly Rural Authorities but oneday later the scheme had been substituted by DCLG for one relating to super sparsity. There was considerable variance between the schemes and the second scheme involved less member authorities but for (on average) higher amounts. The position was very unfortunate. DCLG had admitted an officer error with the wrong scheme having been originally posted on their website. Even then the scheme which was one of £8.5 m for one year in no real way returned the £136m rural areas had lost to damping. This would however be a vehicle setting outside the main formula and as such if it could be maintained may come in useful in that capacity.

The Chairman reported that the LGA had indicated a willingness to help

A briefing note to go out to MPs was agreed in the hope of informing the back bench debate due on Monday the 11th and the formal settlement date on the 13th.

The Executive agreed that the position should continue to be fought with the utmost tenacity. The impact in relation to 14/15 was devastating and the group must do everything it possibly could to restore to each authority the improvement occasioned by stronger sparsity in the summer consultation but subsequently damped away by Government in the Provisional and Final Settlement. A detailed plan of action for 2013/14 would be prepared and submitted to the Executive by e mail for approval.

2. The Future Direction of the Rural Services Network

The Director had tabled a very detailed report on the Officer Group's foreseen way forward for the organisation. The paper was discussed. Members were keen to see clear identification for rural economy discussions and also reference to the Private Sector in delivering local government services in response to the increasing Commissioning role being adopted by Councils that the Research side might also give consideration to and where the involvement of private sector bodies could enhance knowledge. The approved suggestions in summary were therefore:-

- (a) In operational terms, separate the representational and research sides of the organisation by establishing a 'Rural England' research operation.
- (b) Having a separate board (but totally accountable to the Executive) running that particular service.
- (c) Seeking to have on that board former CRC Commissioners to give the initiative clear rural kudos and possibly people from other rural organisations – like the National Trust.
- (d) Encouraging this research operation in the direction of grant funding and sponsorship (areas unlikely to be possible unless it was separated operationally from the representational side of the organisation)
- (e) Seeking the find a patron figure who could assist with approaches to the private sector to assist in the establishment of this operation.
- (f) The clear provision through this subdivision of the opportunities to bid for contracts for research work and other commissioned roles.
- (g) The opportunity to work in liaison with potential commercial partners to bid for commissions.
- (h) The name of the organisation being formally recognised as 'The Rural Services Network (incorporating SPARSE Rural and the Rural Services Partnership)
- (i) That on the representative side of the Network a series of SIGs of SIGS should be established in respect of Rural Health; Rural Housing; Rural Fire; Rural Community Safety; Rural Transport; Rural Economy.
- (j) Enquiries should be made of Dame Janet Reynolds (formerly of the National Trust) to see if she was willing to be the first patron.

3. Public Health Financial Monitoring.

The Chief Executive was keen to establish a system for financial monitoring relating to Public Health particularly as the function had now fallen into Local Government and Public Health Directors. Although recent announcements had seen a slight rural improvement there was still no sparsity factor in the formula. It was felt a system of monitoring across a range of authorities should be undertaken. The executive agreed the undertaking of this work

The RSN had been offered a place on a Defra group overseeing research in this area. The offer had been accepted

4. Strengthening the Rural Services Network Staffing Team

A report was presented to the Executive on the current staffing situation. It was felt there was a current need to widen the services offered by the Network and the opportunity should be taken to involve in the team further officers seeking to achieve long term continuity of operation of the organisation. Andy Dean, Kerry Booth and Nick Payne had recently joined and a lot of emphasis would now be able to be given to networking across services and topic areas. It was considered the group had a vital role to play here as the number of staff able to be employed by individual authorities shrank back and the use of networks and sharing information became more and more key. Clearly this initiative would stretch the financial resource of the organisation but it was felt the organisation had to be ambitious.

5. The Rural Information Exchange

The Executive received a report on the partnership arrived at with the CCRI (Gloucestershire University). The intention was to bring services together to bid under the heading of The Rural Information Exchange. There would two intended major groupings a Rural Survey and a Rural Conference. It was hoped both the concept and the individual services could be taken forward through Community-Educational funding arrangements where frequently short term bidding opportunities were available. The Exchange might present as follows:-

THE RURAL SURVEY

RURAL OPINION PANEL

Designed to be a panel of respondents, who have identified themselves as either living in, or being interested in, rural areas. It will act as a vehicle to inform policy makers, opinion formers, and businesses.

LIBRARY OF GOOD RURAL PRACTICE

The service is operating in a reduced form already. The ultimate aim as it expands is that it will act as a reference area that will help sustain and improve service delivery for the benefit of rural organisations, communities and businesses.

RURAL VULNERABILITY SERVICE

A service designed to establish in one place a comprehensive and structured compendium of current web references to topic areas which it is felt make rural England particularly vulnerable. It will commence by working on rural, transport, fuel poverty and broadband, issues.

THE HEART OF THE VILLAGE RESEARCH

Intended compilation service giving information about shops, pubs and petrol filling stations located in English villages. It will identify trends, make data more readily available and publicise successes.

THE RURAL CONFERENCE

NETWORKING FOR REAL

Rural areas in England are often disparately located in pockets across the country. This service seeks to use advancing technology to link in and network discussion groups both for professionals and community groups. Such networking will be particularly important at a time of ever reducing resource.

ANNUAL RURAL ENGLAND CONFERENCE

As the number of mainstream rural organisations recede through the austerity years the opportunities for face to face rural discussion and debate narrow. Significant rural forums are essential. A significant rural conference would provide the opportunity for extensive rural debate and discussion and equally importantly an extensive number of working groups to examine in some detail particular issues.

UK RURAL POLICY AND PRACTITIONERS GROUP

There is a small group doing some initial work in this area. Grant assistance would really kick start a process that appears increasingly essential as greater autonomy is given to the Home Countries and varying systems and outcomes emerge. Comparison across and learning from across the United Kingdom is really useful.

The concepts and proposals for The Exchange were approved by the Executive.

6. The Rural Vulnerability Service

The Service was an intended part of the Rural Information Exchange. However in this instance early progress had been able to be made because of discussions with Calor. They were prepared to introduce matching finance with RSN to allow the service to be commenced from then 1st of April around three topics—Rural Fuel Poverty- Rural Broadband and Rural Transport. The Executive approved the arrangement and welcomed the introduction of this new service.

7. Agreement with the National Trust

The outcome of negotiations with the National Trust to establish a Statement of Intent between the two organisations were outlined and agreed. Formal announcement and press publication would take place shortly.

8. Budget Statement 2012/13- 2013/14.

The Chief Executive presented the budget and revised (since the AGM) estimated outturn for the current financial year and revised estimate for 2013/14. These were agreed by the Executive. A separate meeting of the Rural Services Partnership took place at 11 25 a.m and Councillor Nick Worth was elected as Chairman of the Partnership for the 2013/14 year. Authority was given for two additional officers to have debit cards to be used for travelling purposes.