

Meeting of the Rural Unitary Group held on 25th November 2013 at the LGA, London.

Present:

Cllr Roger Begy (Rutland); Cllr Peter Bugast (North Somerset), Cllr Les Ford (Cheshire West & Chester), Cllr Rachel Bailey (Cheshire East), Cllr Cecilia Motley (Shropshire), Graham Biggs (RSN), David Inman (RSN), Andy Dean (RSN)

Apologies:

Cllr Alex Folkes (Cornwall), Cllr Roger Phillips (Herefordshire), Cllr Liz Redfern (North Lincolnshire), Cllr Jane Scott (Wiltshire)

1. Finance – Rural Fair Share Position

An update was given concerning the current position as it was understood.

- a. DCLG may be offering a further ESSA Fund.
- b. The Rural Fair Share Group of MPs wished to see the gap between Rural and Urban closed by 10 points by 2020. This it was felt could be secured by, in reality, differential rates of grant formulae reduction.
- c. The RSN would press in 2014/15 for a bonus of at least £30 million to rural authorities whether by formulae alterations or by ESSA but pointing out that the formulae needed to be altered by 10 points by 2020 and that additional sparsity grant had been recognised as necessary in 2013/14 but had then been indiscriminately removed by other changes and damping. The position would be revisited after the Provisional Settlement was announced in mid December. It was felt rural unitaries were in a really difficult position. It was considered they had been set up largely with very low balances and had no room for manoeuvre.

A survey would be undertaken across the Group to see if their claim was valid. It would involve comparison across Earmarked Reserves and General Fund Balances against totality of budget. The offer of a role in monitoring of the business rate situation with DCLG in rural areas was outlined to the Group.

2. Finance – Funding Formula for New Public Health Duties

RSN has been investigating this to see if there was an urban/rural divide. ACRA had promised relevant figures. There was an APPG on rural Services on the 16th January 2014 when this process might begin. There was some concern that staffing and budget levels here were in excess of other local government areas.

The work of the Rural Health Network and its successful conference in October was detailed.

3. Current Issues – Current Suggestions

The following work areas had emerged for the Group.

The Group were asked if lead officers could be appointed as detailed:

- a. Broadband – Shropshire, ?East Riding, ?North Lincolnshire

- b. Primary Schools – Cheshire East, Rutland, ?East Riding, ?Wiltshire
- c. Transport - ?Herefordshire, ?Wiltshire
- d. Finance – North Somerset, Cheshire West & Chester, Rutland. It was hoped one officer could deal with the General Rate fund and another Service Formula considerations
- e. Adult Social Care – Cheshire West & Cheshire, Cornwall, North Lincolnshire

In each case the operational limbs identified in the agenda were approved for the immediate future but priorities would be as detailed below.

The main areas of operation it was felt might be:-

- a. Broadband – The pattern would vary from authority to authority. 96% coverage had been achieved in Rutland for instance. The position in other localities was however dire. There was concern about how it might be possible to ever get 100% coverage and the whip hand BT seemed to have which was felt to be unhealthy. ‘State Aid’ rules were it was felt counter-productive as opposed to positive.

- b. Primary Schools

The awarded sparsity payments had been somewhat deceiving. They were brought in from such a low base that they hadn’t really helped materially. The emphasis should be on primary schools. Their removal caused massive social impact for communities. Many were excellently led but the obvious lack of range that small schools could offer was unacceptable to Ofsted. The use of Federations did not help here.

It was felt there may be a need for a special campaign to explain all this (?through the Rural Fair Share Group).

A future meeting with CCN might be a possibility; together with a presentation at a future meeting of someone from the F40 group?

Cheshire East had for this year at least introduced their own sparsity funding formula. It would be interesting to see how this panned out.

- c. Transport

Had been placed in a totally invidious position and had often had to be cut. Many Ring and Ride schemes had gone and charging for over 16 year olds had begun. It was felt the tack to be taken was an ‘access to services’ one. The problems being occasioned for old people who were retiring into the countryside in ever greater numbers and then found they were no longer able to drive was a really serious one. It was felt a far more objective basis needed to be taken in relation to concessionary fare schemes and taxi based operation.

A group of transport officers was being set up across the RSN. Members were asked to contact their officers and encourage them to join this group which would also involve franchise providers.

d. Finance

See paragraph 1c above.

e. Adult Social Care

This area was felt to be massively important. It was at 40% of budget in many authorities and could eventually be taking up the majority of the budget.

It was felt there would be value in looking at work that sought (like refuse) to establish

- The variance between the service in market towns and across different types of their hinterland
- The differing costs involved in recruiting appropriate people in rural areas where the available market was often thin.

This additional cost was becoming of greater relevance as:

- (i) The percentage of old people increased
- (ii) The service became a greater percentage of the budget

The officers would look at the situation and report back. In the meantime a survey would be conducted to establish the trends across the group in terms of budget take. It was hoped that a bid to the Transformations Fund might help. Andy Dean would have a look at the ground rules of the Fund and give an assessment of how any bid might have to be pitched.

4. Lead Officer for the Group as a whole

It was decided the Lead Officer for the Group would be the senior officer of the Chair from time to time. Helen Briggs of Rutland would therefore be invited to be its first Lead Officer.

5. Membership

It was recognised that councillors would not always be able to make meetings and the planned tele meetings. All Members were therefore asked to appoint both a normal representative and a substitute to stand in when they were not available.

6. Next Meetings

It was felt this would, in the short term, be a group of nine authorities. A phone or tele conference between members would take place in February and it was hoped a further one could be arranged for May. It was anticipated the next meeting for real might take place at the time of the LGA Conference at Bournemouth in July 2014.

7. Any Other Business

RSN offered to see if they could establish for the group, and possibly for others, a service networking rural council experience of LEPs operation. Andy Dean would prepare a scoping paper for future consideration.

8. Next Steps

Approaches would be made to Redcar and Cleveland, Central Bedfordshire, Bedford, West Berkshire and North East Somerset to establish potential membership interest. It was felt however that there was no alternative to face to face discussions when this became possible.