

Note of decisions taken and actions required

Title: SPARSE-Rural SIG and Rural Services Network

Date and time: 11.30am, 18 November 2013

Venue: The Westminster Suite, Local Government House

Attendance:

Martin Hawkins (ACRE); Cllr Leslie Ken (Bath and North East Somerset); Cllr Raymond Singleton-McGuire (Boston BC); Barbara Shaw (CAB); Holly Sims (Calor) Cllr Myles Cullen (Chichester DC); Paul Over (Chichester DC); Revd Richard Kirlew (Church in Wales); Cllr Hilary Carrick (Cumbria CC); Cllr K Potter (East Devon DC); Cllr Rupert Reichhold (East Northamptonshire DC); Cllr Gordon Nicholson (Eden DC); Ulrika Diallo (Federation of Small Businesses); John Birtwistle (First); Alderman Ray Ellis (Hampshire CC) Cllr R Phillips (Herefordshire Council); Cllr N Daubney (Kings Lynn and West Norfolk BC); Cllr Lewis Strange (Lincolnshire CC); Cllr Derrick Haley (Mid Suffolk DC); Michael Parker (National Farmers Union); Cllr David Worden (North Devon DC); Cllr Peter Bryant (North Somerset Council); Cllr Robert Heseltine (North Yorkshire CC); Malcolm Leading (Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils); Cllr R Begy OBE (Rutland CC); Cllr Cecilia Motley (Shropshire Council); Cllr Madge Shingleton (Shropshire Council); Cllr Michael Hicks (West Devon BC & South Hams DC); Cllr Jeremy Savage (South Norfolk DC); Cllr Peter Stevens (St Edmundsbury DC); Mr William Jacobs (South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse DCs); Cllr Geoff Holdcroft (Suffolk Coastal DC); Frances Bedding (Suffolk CC); Cllr Chris Punt (Waveney DC and Suffolk CC); Cllr Own Bierley (West Lindsey DC); Stewart Horne (Bip); Lindsey Cawrey (North Kesteven); Steve Kennett.

Officers: David Inman (RSN); Dan Bates (RSN); Kerry Booth (RSN); Brian Wilson (RSN); Johann Tasker (RSN)

Apologies for absence:

Richard Kemp (Babergh DC); Hugo Perks (CABs); Cllr Alex Folkes (Cornwall Council); Cllr Knowles-Fitton (Craven DC); Paul Shevlin (Craven DC); Peter Moore (Cornwall Rural Housing Association Ltd); Ian Cartwright (Cumbria Fire & Rescue); Eileen Swan (Derby College); Cllr Roger Croad (Devon CC); Cllr Evison (East Riding Council); Joanna Symons (Exmoor National Park); Peter Shipp (EYMS Group Ltd); Jane Horne (Forest of Dean DC); Cllr Margaret Squires (Mid Devon DC); Nigel Williams (Norfolk Fire); Sharon Easton (Notts Healthcare); Nick Daibell (Notts Healthcare); Cllr Carol Clarke (South Northamptonshire Council); Cllr Jennie Ellard (Stratford-on-Avon DC); Cllr Cunningham (Tunbridge Wells BC); Lee Colyer (Tunbridge Wells BC); Cllr Philip Sanders (West Devon BC).

Item Decisions and actions

Sparse Rural Meeting

Cllr Roger Begy notified the Group of the sad news that Cllr Mac Cotterell had passed away.

The Group observed a minute's silence in Cllr Cotterell's memory.

Cllr Begy welcomed Cllr Peter Fleming, Chair of the LGA's Improvement

and Innovation Board, to observe the meeting.

Apologies were noted from Graham Biggs who had had an accident and was unable to attend.

The Group sent their best wishes to Graham Biggs for a speedy recovery.

1 Election of Chairman for the ensuing year

Cllr Begy said that due to his chairing of the Unitary Group, a separate Chairman would now be required for the SIG.

Cllr Cecilia Motley, Shropshire, was nominated and seconded as Chairman.

Cllr Motley offered her sincere thanks to Cllr Begy for his incredibly hard work and strengthening of the SIG. Cllr Motley was delighted that Cllr Begy would continue as Chairman of the Unitary Group.

The Group agreed a vote of thanks for Cllr Begy.

2 Election of Vice Chairmen for the ensuing year

David Inman outlined the current positions, highlighting the vacancy left behind by Cllr Cotterell.

Cllr Peter Stevens, St Edmundsbury, was nominated and seconded as Vice Chairman for the East.

The vacancy for a Vice Chairman without Portfolio was deferred.

3 Election of First Vice Chair

Cllr Robert Heseltine, North Yorkshire, was nominated and seconded as First Vice Chair.

4 Constitution

David Inman said that there were no proposed changes to the Constitution.

Members pointed out a typo in paragraph 1.5 of the Constitution.

The Group agreed to amend the Constitution to correct paragraph 1.5 at the next meeting.

Action

- Constitution to be amended at the next meeting.

5 Fairer Funding Campaign

Cllr Motley highlighted the great amount of work being done on the

campaign, including on the Parliamentary Constituency Petition.

David Inman updated the Group on the Petition, which had aimed to target as many rural MPs as possible. The Petition was signed by a commendable 119 different constituencies and therefore 119 MPs had been petitioned on the subject and it had now been handed into the House, where 26 MPs attended, including the Rt. Hon. Eric Pickles MP. The process has raised the profile of the Campaign and the Rural MPs Group have sought to meet with the Rt. Hon. Eric Pickles MP. Officer level discussions continue with Government and a settlement was expected in December.

Members discussed:

- the need to continue to press other government contacts, local members and local MPs to back the Campaign.
- using local referenda as a mechanism for change.
- ensuring that Defra are pressed on the messages of the Campaign.
- the impact of funding cuts on rural areas.
- difficulties demonstrating the headline figures with practical examples.
- engaging with CAB members.
- sending a timely update to MPs on the Campaign and Petition, detailing how they can help to lobby government.
- Members congratulated officers on their hard work.

David Inman said that it was not clear what the settlement would be and hoped there would be incremental progress to an improvement for rural areas. The future of ESSA was unclear. On referenda, he said that it is a complicated but interesting route, best looked at by each individual authority. He assured members that they are pressing to meet with the Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP and Dan Rogerson MP. And on funding cuts, David Inman agreed that it was a hard task to convince the public on the difficulties in delivering rural services, especially if the overall economy is improving. Party manifestos need to be influenced early.

Dan Bates added that the SIG is now proactively being approached by Government to discuss ideas, which demonstrated the strength of the Campaign. He highlighted that the campaign data and analysis is available on the website and has been sent to MPs. Updates for CAB and other groups could be provided. The methodology for the comparison of waste services between rural and urban could be shared as a good example to support the figures.

Cllr Motley urged the Group to continue pressing the messages of the Campaign and said that she would take every opportunity to press the messages, including with Defra.

Cllr Peter Stevens agreed to inform Lord De Mauley about the campaign at a scheduled meeting.

Actions

- Updates for CAB and other groups to be provided.
- Methodology for the comparison of waste services to be shared.

Cllr Motley thanked all for their contributions and urged all to keep pressing the key messages of the Fairer Funding Campaign.

6 Performance

The operation of the service was detailed.

Rural Services Network Meeting

1 Apologies for absence

Cllr Motley welcomed all to the RSN meeting.

Apologies were noted and would appear in the minutes.

2 Minutes of the last full meeting – 15 July 2013

The minutes the last full meeting were agreed.

3 Minutes of the last Executive Meeting – 16 September 2013

Under matters arising, David Inman updated the Group on the following:

- It was confirmed that RSP is required to pay Corporation Tax.
- It was recommended that subscription fees remain the same, however, a request had been sent to member authorities for a £500 contribution towards the detailed representations currently being carried out.
- On the Organisational Patrons, discussions were in progress with individuals.
- Work was ongoing to form the Transport Service Group. This would be discussed later in the agenda.

The minutes of the last Executive Meeting were agreed.

4 Minutes of the last Directors Meeting – 16 September 2013

David Inman informed the Group that the Accounts April 2012 – April 2013 had been agreed at the last Directors Meeting.

5 Membership (Constitutional Requirement)

David Inman notified the Group that only one authority had given notice to leave. Discussions are taking place with that authority. RSP membership had been falling and attention was being given to this. There is capacity to bring more members in to join RSN and the Vice Chairs are writing letters to authorities who may already be benefiting from RSN's work whilst being outside of membership.

6 Budget 2013/14 and 2014/15 (Constitutional Requirement)

David Inman presented the budget, noting that RSN operation is growing. Members checked on whether all commercial partners had been invoiced and that the accounts had been audited.

7 RSN Services and Schedule of Meetings for 2014 (Constitutional Requirement)

Kerry Booth updated the Group on the dates of the next meetings and reported on the services provided to members, highlighting that some of the services may be of interest to members' colleagues and officers. She urged members to share the offer with others as well as sharing their local experiences and lessons with RSN so that these can be disseminated more widely.

8 Rural Sounding Board

Kerry Booth presented on public sector cuts from the perspective of local parishes, which were surveyed on this area.

Members discussed:

- how parishes were approached and ensuring that all are made aware of future engagement.
- whether the differences in precepts were taken into account.

Kerry Booth said that the parish councils of RSN member authorities had been contacted. On precepts, these had not been taken into account but would be considered in the future.

Action

- Presentation to be circulated.

9 Update on the work of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services

David Inman informed the Group that the last meeting had focussed on housing. The meetings are proving to be a good route for feeding messages into Parliament.

Members said that the APPG had been very useful.

10 Current Issues in the Bus Industry

John Birtwistle thanked the Group for their help on BSOG. In light of cuts to bus services, he stressed the importance of public transport being considered in a more rounded approach. Schools transport funding is key and all providers involved need to be brought together to ensure an efficient and cost-effective solution. He highlighted some best practice information on public sector tendering. The debates around deregulating parking is key for buses, as rural communities need efficient and reliable

services, which need protection from congestion and illegal parking.

Members discussed:

- the need for operators and local authorities to maintain regular contact.
- the reliance of local authorities on community and charity services.
- an example of piloting a weekly scheduled bus service for rural areas to access a nearby market town.
- opportunities for taxi pooling.
- some passengers who are eligible for concessionary fares would be happy to pay for services to help keep them running.
- the need to persuade more people to use the bus.

John Birtwistle agreed that dialogue between all partners is key to delivering an efficient and cost-effective service. On concessionary fares, he said that the Department for Transport are aware of the issue but had no plans to allow payments from concessionary fare users.

David Inman said that the Transport Service Group would bring partners together. He thanked John Birtwistle for his seminar at the LGA Rural Commission which had been well attended.

Cllr Motley highlighted the difficulties in balancing demand and being flexible to meet local needs. An individual solution is needed for each local area.

11 Post Offices

Cllr Ken Potter, East Devon, thanked Cllr Motley for the opportunity to raise the issue of Post Office closures and whether this Group could take the issue forward and invite a minister or Post Office spokesperson to attend a future meeting.

David Inman said that the Federation of Sub Postmasters had been approached and would hopefully be able to attend the March meeting.

Members discussed:

- government access targets.
- the trend of post offices becoming large chain stores.
- inefficient sorting office processes due to local sorting office closures.
- the need for the Post Office to modernise.

Cllr Motley welcomed further discussions at the March meeting and thanked Cllr Potter for his contribution.

12 Post Office Presentation

This item was deferred until the March meeting.

13 Rural Fuel Poverty Project

Holly Sims from Calor thanked the Group for inviting her back to speak and updated the Group on a rural fuel poverty project called the Future of

Rural Energy (FREE) initiative. The project researched the extent and distribution of fuel poverty; provided communities with targeted energy training, road shows, practical guides and energy audits which referred people to schemes and funding; and produced a report to lobby government and ensure its understanding of the issue. They have also produced a joint policy briefing with National Energy Action.

The Department for Energy and Climate Change released fuel poverty figures in August 2013, which showed that fuel poverty is higher in rural areas compared to urban areas. The Government has recognised the issue and a task force has been set up to consider solutions. Calor are continuing to highlight the issues and lobby government. Urgent action and bespoke local solutions are required.

Members discussed:

- difficulties in switching energy providers.
- a lack of information from energy providers.
- difficulties reaching everyone to share the information and advice.

Holly Sims stressed that consumer protection issues should be raised with the Ombudsman and MPs. On reaching people, Calor have funded people to work on the ground to share the information.

David Inman invited Holly Sims to talk with the Executive in January to see how they could help to provide more local perspectives.

Cllr Motley thanked Holly Sims for an interesting discussion.

Action

- Presentation and links to reports to be circulated.

14 UK Policy and Practitioners Group

Brian Wilson updated the Group that there were now lead representatives in all parts of the UK for the UK Policy and Practitioners Group, which is a growing network with the intention to expand its membership.

15 The State of Rural Public Services 2014 (Draft)

Brian Wilson said that the report had now been published and focuses on health, post offices and public transport. This is the fourth report, where previous iterations focus on different areas. He presented the key findings and highlighted that more detailed examples are provided in the report.

Action

- Presentation to be circulated.

16 Website Update

Johann Tasker said that much work had been put into communications in order to give the campaigns the best impact, attract the national media; and reach people who are not already involved in RSN. There had been an increase in website visits, media coverage and parliamentary time for

RSN's work and relations had been strengthened with the national and regional media and print. There is also a growing interest from the broadcast media and on social media.

17 Rural Services Network Manifesto

David Inman said that Brian Wilson's report would help shape the RSN manifesto, a draft of which would then be shared with the Group.

18 EFRA Select Committee Conclusions and Recommendations

David Inman said that the recommendations and conclusions had been circulated to members. It was disappointing that Defra and government had not responded. He suggested that the APPG and Chair of EFRA Select Committee discuss and take issues back to Parliament.

19, 20 & 22 Report on RSP Service Groups / Rural England / Community Group

Items 19, 20 and 22 were taken together.

David Inman said that all initiatives were proceeding well. On the RSP Service Groups: the Housing Group is linking its work to the Rural Health Alliance. The Rural Crime Network and the Rural Health Group were developing well. The Transport Group is looking to pull partners together; and the Rural England Community Group's would meeting in March to establish a research body giving capacity to look into issues in more detail as work progressed.

21 Future Distribution of Meeting Papers and Minutes

David Inman outlined proposals to send hardcopies of meeting papers to members who are attending the meetings, with a supply of spare copies available on the day. There was some concern that this could affect engagement with some members and a compromise was suggested whereby anyone who attended the previous meeting would be added to a distribution list for hardcopies. The entire membership would continue to receive the agenda by email.

Cllr Motley agreed that this would be helpful for regular attendees.

23 Any Other Business

David Inman highlighted a paper on Universal Credit which had been sent to members. A National Farmers Union issue had also been raised.

Cllr Motley agreed to take the National Farmers Union item at the March meeting.

Cllr Motley thanked all for attending and closed the meeting.

NEXT MEETING 17TH MARCH 2014