

Note of decisions taken and actions required

Title: SPARSE-Rural SIG and Rural Services Network

Date and time: 11.30am, 15 July 2013

Venue: The Westminster Suite, Local Government House

Attendance:

Cllr R Begy OBE (Rutland); Paul Dixon (ACRE); Cllr R Kemp (Babergh DC); Cllr Raymond Singleton-McGuire (Boston BC); Cllr Les Ford (Cheshire West and Chester); Mr Paul Over (Chichester DC); Revd Richard Kirlew (Church in Wales); Cllr Chris Knowles-Fitton (Craven DC); Cllr Hilary Carrick (Cumbria CC); Cllr K Potter (East Devon DC); Cllr Rupert Reichhold (East Northamptonshire DC); Cllr Gordon Nicholson (Eden DC); Cllr R Phillips (Herefordshire Council); Cllr N Daubney (Kings Lynn and West Norfolk); Cllr Lewis Strange (Lincolnshire CC); Cllr Pam Posnett (Melton BC); Cllr David Worden (North Devon DC); Cllr Peter Bryant (North Somerset Council); Cllr Robert Heseltine (North Yorkshire CC); Sharon Eaton (Nottinghamshire Health Care); Nick Daibell (Nottinghamshire Health Care); Cllr John Blackie (Richmondshire DC); Cllr Michelle Lowe (Sevenoaks DC); Cllr Cecilia Motley (Shropshire Council); Cllr Madge Shingleton (Shropshire Council); Cllr C Clarke (South Northamptonshire DC); Cllr Peter Stevens (St Edmundsbury DC); Mr William Jacobs (South and Vale Councils); Cllr Own Bierley (West Lindsey DC).

Officers: Graham Biggs (RSN); David Inman (RSN); Kerry Booth (RSN)

Councillor Ken Hudson, Chair of the LGA's Rural Commission was present for part of the meeting

Apologies for absence:

Cllr Gerry Clarkson (Ashford BC); Cllr Peter Bedford (Boston BC); Cllr Myles Cullen (Chichester DC); Peter Moore (Cornwall Rural Housing Association Ltd.); Peter Shipp (EYMS Group Ltd); Cllr Derrick Haley (Mid Suffolk DC); Malcolm Leading (Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils); Martyn Emberson (Northamptonshire FRS); Jake Berriman (Shropshire Housing Group); Cllr Peter Thornton (South Lakeland DC); Geoff Holdcroft (Suffolk Coastal DC); Lee Colyer (Tunbridge Wells BC); Mark Howorth (Western Greyhound).

Item Decisions and actions

Sparse Rural Meeting

Cllr Begy welcomed all to the meeting.

1 Fairer Funding Campaign – Future Activity

Graham Biggs informed members of recent meetings which had taken place, including with Graham Stuart MP and Brandon Lewis MP. MPs remain aggrieved by the gap between rural and urban funding and the impact of damping and will take these issues forward when parliament

returns. In the meantime, MPs have decided to use a Parliamentary Constituency Petition to lobby Government. SPARSE have sent this petition to Leaders of member authorities to request their support.

SPARSE will also support the MPs with any further analysis they identify as helpful. Individual constituency bar charts will be reissued for 2014/15. With this increased activity and with the permission of the Executive, SPARSE has sent a request to member authorities for a voluntary contribution of £500 to help resource the extra work.

David Inman explained the Parliamentary Constituency Petition process and urged councillors to ensure they respond to the correct constituency's petition. He highlighted the 'parliamentarian' wording of the petition but stressed that the critical points are all included. Ministers and junior ministers cannot sign the petition but are obliged to hand in any they receive.

Graham Biggs outlined possible solutions to the funding gap and damping issues and said that SPARSE are keen to get involved with and work to help the civil service. SPARSE would also respond to the New Homes Bonus consultation on the topslice.

Members discussed:

- opportunities to engage with residents at local summer events.
- the need to ensure consistent and concise messages for the petition.
- promoting the 'message' at party conferences and members asked for a brief/executive summary for this.
- There was a discussion around the future of RSG and the need to be alert to changing funding mechanisms.
- Members congratulated Cllr Begy and the team on this crucial work and saw the importance in getting everyone to work together.

Cllr Begy reflected that the campaign had gained recognition by some MPs and that the next stage is to enhance the power of those MPs. SPARSE is in contact with civil servants to keep continuity with any reshuffles and said that all funding mechanisms will be looked at going forward.

Actions

- Petition letter sent to Leaders to be sent to members. Chief Executives and Treasurers
- Copy of petition to be sent to members.
- Copy of blank petition to be sent to members.
- Key messages briefing/summary to be sent to members Attending party conferences and who request one

2 Funding the new Public Health Duties

Graham Biggs said that members were concerned that sparsity is not accounted for in the formula for the new public health duties. He will be asking for data and the Advisory Committee for Resource Allocation (ACRA) will take a decision in April 2014. The new rural Unitary Group

should capture some cost details on providing public health services in rural areas. There will also be a review of the Clinical Commissioning Groups' resource allocation, where sparsity will be considered.

Members discussed:

- concern about the length of time until a decision is made by ACRA.
- opportunities for upper tier authorities to engage with district councils and work together on the new duties. Councils are overwhelmed and district councils can be helpful partners in health through their responsibilities for recreation and housing, for example.
- some lack of understanding of rural issues at the Health and Wellbeing Boards and the implications of their decisions on rural areas.
- the sense of silo working in health and tensions between management/administration and GPs.

Cllr Begy highlighted the variation of engagement across areas on health and that working together is crucial.

3 Survey of Impact of Cuts

Item 3 was deferred to the Executive Meeting minutes item.

4 Unitary Group report

Cllr Begy reported that unitary authorities had met and agreed to form a group. The formation of the group is supported by the County Council Network and the LGA has been notified. Constitutionally, the group should have a separate chairman to that of SPARSE / RSN and Cllr Begy, therefore, did not intend to stand as SPARSE / RSN Chairman but rather for the Unitary Group. Suggested topics include; adult social care; access to services; aging population; ambulance services; funding for public health; transport and concessionary fares; potholes; and broadband.

David Inman said that the group would focus on three or four issues and a survey will go to members to prioritise the issues. Officers will be appointed by authorities so that expert panels can be created.

Graham Biggs stressed that the Unitary Group will be a sub-group of SPARSE / RSN. Minutes and updates will be reported at those meetings.

Action

- List of interested authorities to be shared with members once complete.

5 Sparse Rural – report to the LGA

David Inman said that the SPARSE annual report to the LGA (required by all Special Interest Groups) would be circulated.

Cllr Begy asked for nominations for a county council member to join the Executive as Betty Harvey was unsuccessful in the last elections.

Cllr Strange was appointed to the position. He thanked the group, saying

that he was honoured to replace Betty Harvey.

Action

- Annual Report to the LGA to be attached to the minutes of the meeting.

Full Rural Service Network Meeting

David Inman opened the meeting, saying that the LGA are working to reduce paper and that SPARSE / RSN will discuss with the LGA how this can be done together. He asked members to send any ideas and said that they would be kept updated.

1 Apologies for absence

Apologies were noted.

2 Minutes of the last full meeting – 18 March 2013

The minutes of the last full meeting on 18 March 2013 were agreed, with an amendment to reflect apologies received in advance of the meeting from Rupert Reichhold, East Northamptonshire DC.

Matters arising confirmed that a meeting with Brandon Lewis took place.

3 Minutes of the Executive Meeting – 24 June 2013

Under matters arising:

- Item 1c - From 1 January 2014, the grant will be paid to local authorities instead of bus operators and will be ring-fenced. A note on the Bus Service Operators Grant is available to members.
- Item 3 presented the results of the 2013/14 budget survey.
- Item 5 - the Princes Countryside Fund bid had been unsuccessful, though local Prince's Trusts operations are keen to engage with local business entrepreneurs. RSN will continue to engage with the Prince's Trust.
- Item 9, two patrons had declined and two replies were still outstanding.

The minutes were agreed.

4 Rural Fair Share Campaign

The Rural Fair Share Campaign had been covered in the SPARSE meeting.

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5 Structuring of Sparse Rural Group

David Inman said that RSN is looking at creating services for non-representational issues. With the demise of the CRC, some areas of work

are not being covered and RSN is approaching contacts to gauge interest in creating a steering group for these services. The LGA's Rural Commission has been invited to join the group. Research would be kept separate from lobbying activities in an area called Rural England, which would link to the Executive. The team are keen to bring in private sector investment to support the Rural England Service and funding bids may be made. A strategic meeting is due in November.

6 Budget

Graham Biggs said that the budget report would be attached to the minutes of the meeting. He summarised that the budget is on track though remains fluid due to outstanding subscriptions. The budget in Rural Services Partnership Ltd is subject to corporation tax. An exemption was applied for due to the not-for-profit status. Unfortunately, HMRC refused this and subsequent appeals were unsuccessful.

Cllr Begy thanked Graham Biggs, David Inman and the team for their hard work on the budget.

8 Presentation by Ofcom on Rural Broadband

Item 8 was taken next.

James Thicket, Director of Nations and Market Development at Ofcom, presented to members on the availability of communication services in the UK. He highlighted Ofcom's [Communications Market Report 2013](#) and the issues for rural areas on broadband, mobile and new technology. Access to these services are important for communities as citizens to access online public services; as consumers to access deals and savings; and for the economy, especially small businesses. There is less broadband coverage in rural areas, despite the demand being higher, there is less choice of providers and patchy coverage on key sections of road.

Ofcom supports the role of the markets but recognises that markets are imperfect, for example the high fixed costs mean high up-front investment in schemes. Costs to provide communications services are higher in rural areas so there is a lower incentive for providers to cover those areas. Rural solutions include: government or local authority subsidy; public procurement; service obligations on providers; facilitation of market-based solutions; or community-based solutions.

Members discussed:

- how easy and effective it is for communities to understand the technology and deliver community solutions?
- what hope can members offer residents who live in remote areas with old technology and little or no connections?
- concern about performance issues such as badly maintained landlines, where the basic technology is not well-maintained.
- how Ofcom works with Government to ensure their decisions, for example moving to paperless farming administration, works locally.
- how to ensure BT is held to account where it is the single provider.
- with barriers such as hills and bridges, some areas are looking for

satellite and wifi solutions.

James Thicket suggested that a good model for community communications solutions is to set up a local business on a formal basis to approach a provider. He stressed that local buy-in is crucial and that all would benefit. Communities benefit from government or local authority solutions as the market will only deliver to a certain extent. Schemes always start with the more densely populated areas in order to reach the most amount of people in one go. BDUK is aiming to reach small population hubs before single dwellings. James said that research will look at the benefits to those areas which have had state intervention compared to those who have not.

James confirmed that Ofcom monitors BT and Open Reach's performance against targets but cannot focus on specific areas. He said that he was confident in the tender process and said that Ofcom were assisting them by providing evidence and data. Ofcom advises government on communications and helps their understanding of the impact of policy decisions locally.

Cllr Begy thanked James for attending and taking questions.

Action

- Report and presentation to be circulated to members.

7 Networking for Real

Kerry Booth spoke to members about work on the Networking for Real service. Currently, most communications happen between RSN and Member authorities, with little networking taking place between members, across authorities, which constitutes an untapped potential for rural authorities.

Local authorities have reduced resources and less idea-generation capacity. There is a need for members to bounce ideas off each other and work together. The KHub (hosted by the LGA) offers an interactive platform for this and a group has been set up for RSN/Sparse on the KHub. This will enable them to start to interact with each other and provide feedback on issues and discuss key concerns.

In addition, Kerry urged members to ensure that their authorities' communications colleagues follow RSN on twitter so that messages can be shared and so that RSN can retweet local authority messages where appropriate.

Members agreed that the KHub was a good mechanism for their network to share issues, discuss evidence, help local authorities to respond to consultations and publicise best practice.

Graham Biggs suggested the RSP groups be invited to join the KHub. It is currently restricted to local authorities but options for the RSP will be considered.

This had been dealt with under Item 3 of the SPARSE meeting.

10 RSP

Graham Biggs updated members on the RSP groups.

A presentation is to be made to the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners Rural Crime Conference and dialogue is taking place with a national community safety group in respect of a Rural Crime and. Fear of Crime Group

The Rural Fire Group has had its first meeting and is due to meet following the national fire group meetings. Following a DCLG report into fire services, the RSN will work with the rural fire group on the rural issues raised in the report.

David Inman said that in respect of a Rural Housing Group discussions were taking place including with the National Housing Federation's Rural Housing Alliance. However, the Federation itself is unable to prioritise between urban and rural issues and will no longer be supporting a separate Rural Housing Alliance.

On the Heath Group Graham Biggs highlighted the second rural health conference on 18 October. Kerry Booth added that a Rural Health Network had now been created.

In respect of a Transport Group it was difficult to engage with providers due to their competitor relationship. The select committee on transport may, however, provide an avenue to get rural messages to government.

Members discussed:

- concern about the police resources available in rural areas. David Inman said that the RSP group are looking to ensure the police consider the rural element.
- concerns over firearms licencing, where there is a need for firearms in rural areas.
- there was a suggestion to create KHub groups for the RSP groups, which Kerry Booth will consider.

11 UK Rural Policy and Practitioners' Group

Conversations are on-going and the next meeting is due in the autumn.

12 Items from the Long Grass

Members discussed:

- local authorities' statutory duty to publish notices in local papers.
- suggested Post Offices as a future agenda item.
- suggested an LGA Rural Conference agenda item on the Government's wind turbine announcement, which members wanted

clarity on.

Action

- Cllr Begy to speak to the Rural Commission Chairman and the LGA about wind turbines.

David Inman informed members that SPARSE / RSN will be participating in a rural transport workshop at the LGA Rural Conference.

Cllr Begy closed the meeting.

NEXT MEETING 18TH NOVEMBER 2013