

Note of decisions taken and actions required

Title:	SPARSE SIG and Rural Services Network
Date and time:	11.30am, 18 March 2013
Venue:	The Westminster Suite, Local Government House

Attendance:

Cllr R Begy OBE (Rutland) Cllr R Kemp (Babergh DC); Cllr Myles Cullen (Chichester DC); 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 J W Upsall (East Lindsey DC); Cllr Gordon Nicholson (Eden DC); Cllr Mac Cotterell (Fenland DC); Cllr R Phillips (Herefordshire Council); Cllr N Daubney (Kings Lynn and West Norfolk); Cllr Mrs B Harvey OBE (Lincolnshire CC); David Hughes (Malvern Hills DC); Cllr Pam Posnett (Melton BC); Cllr Derrick Haley (Mid Suffolk DC); Cllr I G S Cartwright MBE (North Kesteven DC); Cllr Robert Heseltine (North Yorkshire CC); Andy Dean (RSN); Kerry Booth (RSN); Cameron Clark (Sevenoaks DC); Cllr Cecilia Motley (Shropshire Council); Miranda Ashwell (Shropshire Council); Cllr Madge Shingleton (Shropshire Council); Cllr M J Hicks (South Hams DC); Cllr Charles N Worth (South Holland DC); David Evans (South Lakeland DC); Cllr C Clarke (South Northamptonshire DC); Cllr Jennie Ellard (Stratford on Avon DC); Cllr Peter Stevens (St Edmundsbury DC); Jim Brown (Suffolk CC); Roger Johnson (Torrige DC); John Cunningham (Tunbridge Wells BC); Cllr P Sanders (West Devon BC); Mr William Jacobs (South and Vale Councils).

Officers: Graham Biggs (RSN); Dan Bates (RSN); David Inman (RSN)

Apologies for absence:

Cllr Alan Smith (Allerdale DC); Robert Barlow (Boston BC); Cllr Raymond Singleton McGuire (Boston BC); Barbara Shaw (CAB); Emma Trahearn (Melton Council); Malcolm Leading (Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils); Paul Raymond (Shropshire Fire); Cllr Bob Standley (Wealden DC); Cllr Lewis Strange (West Lindsey DC).

Item	Decisions and actions	Action by
------	-----------------------	-----------

Sparse Rural Meeting

Cllr Begy welcomed all to the meeting.

1 2012/13 Settlement/Business Rates Situation

Dan Bates presented, highlighting that although the Government's acknowledgement of the additional costs of rural services is welcome, the funding formula remains urban-centric and the Efficiency Support for

Services in Sparse Areas (ESSSA) funding does not bridge the gap.

SPARSE / RSN are minded to call for a 1.5% narrowing of the gap between rural and urban areas per year over the next 6 years through a number of possible mechanism, including an unwinding of damping, an increase of sparsity weighting or a decrease of density weighting in the formula or (as a fallback position) through an expansion and elongation of ESSSA in terms of both quantum and the number of councils benefiting.

Dan Bates said that SPARSE / RSN and rural authorities have been effective and have engaged with ministers and MPs. Lobbying must continue and he asked for members' continued help with this.

David Inman urged members to keep pushing rural language and messages to ensure MPs fully appreciated rural issues.

2 Fairer Funding Campaign – Future Activity

Graham Biggs outlined the background to damping and highlighted the great success that the Government has now better recognised the additional costs of rural services in the Needs Block.

Members discussed:

- concern about how to increase support for the campaign from MPs as well as from organisations such as the Local Government Association (LGA) and the District Councils Network (DCN).
- using the party conferences as a way to push the campaign.
- whether the campaign and APPG information could be made available online so that MPs could sign up online.

Dan Bates updated members that as most rural areas were unlikely to do well out of business rates and growth, SPARSE / RSN are looking to do some work on this area. He said the group of MPs supporting the campaign is expanding and reminded members that they can request a one page piece of local rural information to take to their MPs and that this would also be available on the website.

Graham Biggs said that he would liaise with Graham Stuart MP's office about the Fairer Funding Campaign and the APPG. SPARSE/RSN has a good relationship with the LGA but it could not support the campaign due to its redistributive nature. DCN has the same issue.

David Inman reminded members to recognise that some MPs have a mix of urban and rural in their constituencies and that only MPs in areas which are members of SPARSE are likely to be responsive. It was essential all of these were involved.

3 Funding the new Public Health Duties

Graham Biggs said that the Advisory Committee for the Department of Health did not have sparsity data for the health formula or local health responsibilities and that SPARSE / RSN and Graham Stuart MP would write to ACRA on the matter and seek to be involved.

4 Freeze Grant Survey

Dan Bates updated members on the Freeze Grant Survey, which showed that many more local authorities did not take the freeze grant this year compared to last year.

Members noted the public interest in the 2% increase in council tax which triggers a referendum.

5 Change to constitution

David Inman told members that the AGM sought to change the constitution and outlined the background behind this potential widening of activity. The changes had been put to the membership and from 22 responses, 21 were supportive. Ribble Valley BC did not support the changes, but rather favoured vetting individual applications to join from Significant Rural authorities.

Members agreed the amendments to the constitution which had been presented to the Annual General Meeting.

Full Rural Service Network Meeting

1 Apologies for absence

Cllr Begy said that apologies would be added to the minutes.

2 Minutes of the last full meeting – 19 November 2012 (AGM)

Responding to a member query under Minute 8 about the LGA Annual Conference, Graham Biggs said that a session had been requested and added that SPARSE/RSN are now invited to the LGA's Rural Commission and Policy Review Group meetings.

The minutes were agreed following the amendment of the apologies and a typing error in Minute 5.

3 Minutes of the Executive Meeting – 7 February 2013

The minutes were agreed.

David Inman updated members on Minute 5 on the Rural Information

Exchange. Discussions are taking place with wider organisations and members will continue to be updated.

4 Rural Fair Share Campaign

Graham Biggs outlined the campaign and said a meeting would be requested with the Right Hon Eric Pickles MP. He outlined that rural evidence has been provided but that evidence justifying density is lacking. The Government has allowed a welcome change to sparsity, however damping also needs to be amended to allow that cash to flow to rural authorities.

Graham Biggs said that the campaign should have some focus on health service funding and on the new local public health responsibilities.

Cllr Begy urged members to contact the team with any questions.

5 Structuring of Sparse Rural Group

David Inman said that constitutional changes would widen the remit of the group to include significantly rural areas, which often have similar needs as predominately rural areas. He highlighted the consideration, as per Minute 2 of the Executive Meeting minutes, to formally separate RSN representational and research work areas and create a Research Board to allow for more transparency of operations. Members would be kept up-to-date. Commissioners of Rural Communities who would retire on 1st April had been asked to be involved.

Members discussed how a new Board would be appointed and what constitution it would have.

Proposal agreed.

6 Budget

Graham Biggs said that the budget was still somewhat fluid as some subscriptions were outstanding. However, he projected the figures as firm. The Executive will be asked to approve the final budget. He also updated members that RSP will probably show a small profit and will be liable for corporation tax, for which a dispensation has been requested from HMRC.

7 A Unitary Special Interest Group

Cllr Begy said that a letter had been sent to some leaders at East Riding and North Lincolnshire to create dialogue on the formation of a unitary group, for which there has already been some support from Shropshire and Cornwall.

Members suggested adult social care funding should be an item for the next agenda.

8 State of Rural Public Services 2012

Brian Wilson outlined the background to the 2012 report, which enables the membership to share issues, facts and good practice as well as providing the chance to highlight key rural issues to a wider audience.

The report blends evidence from rural areas with intelligence from RSN and focussed on broadband, business support and advice, fire and rescue services and fuel poverty.

Members discussed broadband issues around:

- the limited choice of providers and their value for money.
- difficult geographies in rural areas.
- exploring other options for hard-to-reach areas.
- linking broadband work and debates to other areas such as health, where broadband can also help address issues in this area.

9 Nick Goodman, Change Agents UK

Nick Goodman, Charity Leader, Change Agents UK, introduced Change Agents, which has a remit around encouraging energy sustainability and responsibility as individuals and communities.

He introduced the Energy Action for Rutland scheme which raises awareness of energy issues and fuel poverty and is running a project to help households conduct energy audits and increase their property's energy efficiency. There is a broad group of partners and funders involved, each with a different angle on fuel poverty as a priority.

Members discussed:

- how the renewable energy obligation will impact on fuel poverty.
- the need to engage with parish councils.
- increased pressure for rural residents due to poor housing and higher fuel costs.
- the need to join up local and national work on fuel poverty.

Mr Goodman was thanked for the excellent presentation.

10 Measuring Child Poverty

Graham Biggs introduced the item. He felt members should be fully aware of the issues of child poverty in rural areas.

The position was discussed.

Cllr Begy stressed that rural access to services is particularly important on this issue.

11 RSP

David Inman outlined the development of representative groups for certain services under RSP. Ten members were normally required to form a working group. The groups hope to feed into various APPGs incrementally and grow their respective memberships.

Rural Police and Crime Commissioners were being approached and talks were ongoing with the national community safety organisation with a view to forming a Rural Crime and Fear of Crime Group.

There was a meeting after the Annual Fire Conference of ten fire & rescue authorities with the intention of forming a Fire & Rescue Group.

RSP had a health conference in November 2012 and subsequently eight health organisations had expressed an interest in getting involved and funding a Health Group. Further work was being undertaken and a further conference would be held in Exeter in the autumn.

The Transport group is proving difficult as each service area tends to focus on their individual issues. RSP hopes to be able to join up the common threads and establish a working arrangement where rural problems could be considered.

Andy Dean is working to improve a Rural Housing Group, in what is a crowded area nationally. However, RSP could be differentiated by its rural nature and its interface between a variety of organisations. A partnership with CIH is developing to help give rural a stronger rural focus and it was hoped in time a group of rural housing associations could be brought together.

Members expressed concerns as to whether the development of these groups could mean that RSN was spread too thinly. This point would be considered by the Executive.

Graham Biggs said that RSP would always focus on feeding work from varying work areas into the Rural Services APPG to demonstrate the breadth of rural issues and may also feed information into other Parliamentary forums and into government departments and agencies.

14 Items from the Long Grass

Cllr Begy took Item 14 next and invited Cllr Gordon Nicholson, Eden DC, to address the group.

Cllr Nicholson expressed concern over poor footway amenity lighting and the costs of addressing such issues. He said that Eden was happy to share its work on this area.

Graham Biggs said that Eden DC's briefing note would be made available in the minutes and that the issue could be added to the agenda of the next

Executive Meeting.

Eden DC briefing note to be added to the minutes of the meeting. Please find attached at [Appendix A](#)

Highways and street lighting to be considered for the Executive Meeting agenda.

12 UK Rural Policy and Practitioners Group

Brian Wilson is leading on the further development of this cross-UK group of organisations, which provides an opportunity to meet to share reports, policy, experiences and issues (as opposed to having a lobbying focus). The group is growing and is looking to continue to widen its membership and operation.

Graham Biggs stressed the value at understanding how other parts of the UK undertake rural work, learning about their best practice and whether they have different powers and approaches which England could learn from. He stressed that it would be useful if the organisations involved ensure their own research takes a rural perspective.

13 Revised Service and Website

David Inman introduced the work, which Johann Tasker is leading on, to revise the RSN Service and broaden out the website to attract interest from both residents and rural authorities. He highlighted the importance of being able to establish networks. Kerry Booth will report to the next Executive on how she feels this networking aspect can be taken forward.

Cllr Begy formally thanked the officer team. His sentiments were echoed by members.

Cllr Begy closed the meeting.