

Note of decisions taken and actions required

Title:	SPARSE SIG and Rural Services Network
Date and time:	11.30am, 19 November 2012
Venue:	The Westminster Suite, Local Government House

Attendance:

Jenny Stewart (BP); Cllr Myles Cullen (Chichester District Council); Paul Over (Chichester DC); (Cornwall Council) Cllr Hilary Carrick (Cumbria County Council); Cllr R Reichhold (East Northamptonshire Council); Cllr Gordon Nicholson (Eden DC); Cllr Mac Cotterell (Fenland DC); Cllr Ray Ellis (Hampshire CC); Cllr Mrs B Harvey OBE (Lincolnshire County Council); Cllr Margaret Squires (Mid Devon DC); Cllr Hayden Phillips (North Warwickshire BC); Cllr Robert Heseltine (North Yorkshire County Council); Dr David White (Oxfordshire CC); Malcolm Leeding (Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils); Cllr Roger Begy OBE (Rutland County Council); Cllr Cecilia Motley (Shropshire Council); Cllr Madge Shineton (Shropshire Council); Cllr Nick Worth (South Holland DC); Cllr Peter Thornton (South Lakeland DC); Cllr Carole Clarke (South Northamptonshire DC); Cllr David Dodds (South Oxfordshire DC); William Jacobs (South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse DC); Cllr Peter Stevens (St Edmundsbury District Council); Cllr John Cunningham (Tunbridge Wells BC); Lee Colyer (Tunbridge Wells BC); Cllr Lewis Strange (West Lindsey District Council).

Officers: David Inman, Graham Biggs, Dan Bates, Brian Wilson, Johann Tasker.

Apologies for absence:

Cllr Ken Potter (East Devon); Cllr Julian German (Cornwall); Cllr Barry Wood (Cherwell); Cllr Hibbert-Biles (Oxfordshire); Cllr Peter Bedford (Boston) Cllr Singleton-McGuire (Boston); Dr Jo Farrar (Bath & North East Somerset); Geoff Holdcroft (Suffolk Coastal); Richard Kemp (Suffolk).

Item	Decisions and actions	Action by
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MEETING OF THE SPARSE RURAL SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

Graham Biggs sent his apologies that he would be late to the meeting due to delays on the train

1 Election of Chairman for the ensuing year

Cllr Roger Begy was elected as Chairman for the ensuing year.

2 Election of Vice Chairmen for the ensuing year

Cllr Begy listed the current Vice Chairmen and asked for any other

nominations. David Inman said that Cllr German and Cllr Motley confirmed they were happy to continue as Vice Chairs and he welcomed any other nominations to Vice Chairmen without portfolios.

The existing team of Vice Chairs were re-elected en masse. Cllr Peter Thornton and Cllr Peter Stevens were elected as additional Vice Chairmen without portfolios.

3 First Vice Chair

Cllr Motley was elected as First Vice Chair.

4 Constitution

David Inman outlined some proposed amendments to parts 1.5 and 1.6 of the constitution. The new wording was set out in the agenda papers. The amendments under part 1.5 would allow authorities to have a contractual relationship with the group for its services but would be non-representational. The amendments to part 1.6 would allow the members of the LGA's Rural Commission not otherwise eligible to be members to become an associate member of RSN.

David Inman said that the changes would ensure that predominately rural and significantly rural areas are well represented and ensure as strong a membership and financial situation as could be achieved.

Cllr Begy said that the Rural Commission Chairman has been invited to the Sparse Rural SIG meetings.

Members welcomed associate membership and discussed the relationship with the Rural Services Network.

The revised constitution was put to Members who were in unanimous agreement. It was proposed by the Chair that the document now go out to ballot. The revised document would now go to the wider membership and the matter would be considered again on the 18th March at the next meeting.

5 Fairer Funding Campaign

[note: this discussion took place ahead of the Provisional Settlement announcement] Dan Bates updated members on the fairer funding campaign. The government has recognised the cost of rural services and exemplifications of the funding formula now show that the gap between rural and urban authorities has been bridged by 14%. He said this is a significant improvement and that the campaign's success is undoubtedly due to the significant response from rural authorities to the original consultation. However, damping sweeps away three quarters of this gain

in most authorities' cases. As Sparse cannot disadvantage some authorities, Dan Bates urged members to ensure their authorities press for fairer funding distribution.

Dan Bates outlined the response to *Section 2, Chapter 5: Rural Services of the DCLG Business Rates Retention Technical Consultation and other related issues*, highlighting that the baseline for Business Rate localisation requires adjustment to ensure a fair deal for rural areas.

Cllr Begy said that MPs do not know about or understand damping and urged members to contact their MPs and press them to lobby on fairer funding for rural areas.

Dan Bates reminded members that one page summaries for authorities are available and can be sent to MPs to demonstrate the gaps between urban and rural areas.

Members:

- asked what can realistically be achieved for rural areas and how messages can be promoted.
- highlighted that reductions on Business Rates further reduce capacity and resources for rural areas, which want local growth but are not able to drive this.
- discussed pooling Business rates income between authorities.

Dan Bates said that damping is accepted but that the impact on rural areas must be made less severe and that there are ways to change the process.

Cllr Begy urged members to get officers to send in information on Business Rates. Dan Bates said a survey would be subsequently undertaken on Business rates.

6 Our Consultancy Service

David Inman outlined the RSN offer, which provides as much advice and assistance as possible and aims to make as many links as possible to other organisations. He highlighted the Rural England Service as the best area to work with the LGA's Rural Commission.

Cllr Begy was impressed with the value for money provided by the services.

David Inman confirmed members received all of these services as well as tailored information for each authority on its own particular web page.

7 Performance

Dan Bates detailed the areas which would be covered by the service over the coming year. The service would be targeted on financial information.

FULL RURAL SERVICES NETWORK MEETING

1 Apologies for absence

David Bale (Easton College); Cllr Ken Potter (East Devon District Council); Cllr Julian German (Cornwall Council); Cllr Barry Wood (Cherwell Council); Cllr Hibbert-Biles (Oxfordshire Council); Cllr Peter Bedford (Boston); Cllr Singleton-McGuire (Boston); Dr Jo Farrar (Bath & North East Somerset Council); Geoff Holdcroft (Suffolk Coastal Council); Richard Kemp (Suffolk Council); Nick Daibell (Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust); Sharon Eaton (Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust); Ben Colson (Norfolk Green); Mark Howarth (Western Greyhound).

2 Minutes of the last full meeting – 9 July 2012

The minutes of the last full meeting on 9 July 2012 were approved.

David Inman said that a Unitary Group was still being planned.

Graham Biggs added that to make it successful, officers' support would be needed from unitary member authorities.

3 Minutes of the last Executive meeting – 17th September 2012

The minutes of the last Executive meeting were approved.

David Inman circulated a note on joint working between RSN and the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI).

Members welcomed the fact that RSN was looking to expand concordats with other organisations and also asked that rural health and wellbeing was woven into all service areas, (especially planning) to ensure consideration for older people through flexible housing and transport links, for example.

Graham Biggs and David Inman confirmed that RSN continues to seek to have discussions with wider organizations with a view to establishing further concordats.

Graham Biggs said that the Rural Services Partnership development work continues. It was hoped to see the development of a rural health group, a fire group and a housing group shortly.

David Inman circulated a list of achievements for RSN. He reflected on the achievements list and the excellent value for money for the subscription fee.

David Inman gave a verbal report on membership, saying that the membership of SPARSE Rural has increased. He said it was more difficult for the RSP and its organisations but a situation that saw the engagement of the RSP members in hands on work was being sought.

5 To determine the service charge to be levied in respect of membership for 2013/14. It is suggested by the Executive charges remain unaltered for the fourth consecutive year.

It was agreed that service charges, based around £2095 for Local Authority Members and £495 for RSP Members, remain unaltered (for a fourth consecutive year). Unitaries would be charged (as before) an additional above the base figure based on a head calculation depending on their rural population and Significant Rural members who received slightly less of the services £1500 as previously.

6 Budget 2012/13 and Budget 2013/14

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7 Items 6 and 7 were taken together.

Graham Biggs requested that members authorise the Executive to adopt a final budget as some subscriptions were still outstanding and travel and subsistence may not yet been fully accounted for. He highlighted that a surplus was expected.

8 Work Programme and Schedule of Meetings for 2013

Graham Biggs outlined the work programme and schedule of meetings for 2013. The Sparse Rural priority is to be in a position to effectively monitor Business Rates localisation.

Members welcomed the attendance achieved at RSN seminars and suggested a full conference as a good opportunity to raise RSN's profile.

Graham Biggs said that these discussions formed part of the CCRI proposal. RSN ran a fringe event at the LGA's Rural Conference and both organisations had agreed to work more closely. It was hoped RSN could, in 2013, be given a full slot in the main conference programme.

11 The Website

Item 11 was taken next.

Johann Tasker update members on the improvements to the website, which aim to provide information quicker and simpler, ensure accessibility and reduce duplication. Member areas were being concentrated upon particularly. Back issues of the weekly newsletters are now available online. There are a broad range of page views and a positive amount of

time spent on the site. The content of the newsletters is also increasing.

Cllr Begy gave his thanks for the continual improvements.

9 Presentation from the Chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services

Graham Stuart MP arrived at the meeting to give his views from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Affairs (APPG).

He said it had been a solid year for improving the rural voice in parliament but that there was still more to be done and faster. Work is being done to get the right narrative for the fairer funding campaign. The APPG has taken evidence from wide-ranging partners and was due to meet with Calor the next day to discuss gas storage, access to gas pipelines and high energy prices in housing that is difficult to upgrade. A meeting was also being arranged with Brandon Lewis MP to discuss the effect of damping on the Business Rates formula. Graham Stuart MP urged members to continue to repeat the key rural messages. He asked members for case studies, facts and figures from rural areas to press the government to reflect rural issues in their priorities.

Cllr Begy thanked Graham Stuart MP for his enthusiasm and commitment and time given to meet with RSN.

Members felt positive with the progress being made. Though they were disappointed with the impact of damping on the Business Rates formula and asked whether the rural messages here were getting through to government. Members also asked for the membership of the APPG to be more prominently displayed on the website.

Graham Stuart MP said that the focus had been on getting the rural case together and that now was the time to focus on engaging MPs. Despite having sympathy for the issues, he stressed that MPs are busy and receive a blizzard of messages. Members must therefore continue to press MPs into acknowledging rural challenges, get constituents to write letters and get the local media involved. Rural messages must be clear and demonstrate what success would look like. He said that the membership of the APPG would be made available online and that he is working to persuade more MPs to join and work in a cross-party way.

Graham Biggs gave his thanks to Graham Stuart MP and said that RSN would do all it could to support the APPG and the Rural Fair Share Group.

Graham Stuart MP gave his thanks to members and Graham Biggs and David Inman for their invaluable support. He asked members to maintain their support and looked forward to returning in 12 months' time.

10 Rural Fuel Poverty Project

Holly Sims presented on the Rural Fuel Poverty Project through which Calor is lobbying government. Fuel poverty is on the increase, energy

prices are rising, which impacts harder on rural areas. Calor has little control over the pricing as energy prices follows the oil price index but they are working with partners on consistency of pricing and bringing partners together to shift the focus away from urban to rural fuel issues. She highlighted that urban and rural areas have different housing solutions.

Key findings from Calor research shows that rural fuel poverty is hidden and does not correlate to deprivation. There is a social stigma around not being able to afford to pay bills and of complaining to landlords. Under-occupancy and poor energy-efficient housing are key factors. Fuel poverty impacts on health. The government lacks understanding of rural fuel poverty and government schemes have failed. Calor have a suite of resources on rural housing and other rural solutions and practical advice for consumers. Calor is using its research to lobby government.

Cllr Begy said that it was positive to hear from someone so enthusiastic and committed in getting the rural voice heard.

Holly Sims said that she would circulate the presentation.

14 Community Group

Item 14 was taken. David Inman said that he had given the Community Group an opportunity to share their views and said that some helpful documents on wellbeing had been highlighted. He would circulate this paper to members. Richard Kirlew, national lead for the Church in Wales and a recently appointed Director of the RSP representing Community, attended the meeting to make members aware of the support from diocese, which each have a rural life adviser for local help and support.

Cllr Begy said that this topic would be noted for a future agenda.

12 The Area Forum and Seminar Programme

The RSN Seminar programme was attached for information.

13 The State of Rural Public Services 2012

Brian Wilson informed members that the third State of Rural Public Services report would be published in the following week and that a more detailed presentation would be brought to a future meeting. The report will combine data and national evidence with local intelligence from RSN members. Important issues for rural areas include broadband and mobile broadband, bus services, fire and rescue costs and response times in rural areas and fuel poverty.

Cllr Begy thanked Brian Wilson.

15 Any Other Business

None



RURAL SERVICES
NETWORK