

# **SPARSE- RURAL SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION**

## **ANNUAL REPORT TO THE LGA 2013**

### **HISTORY AND INTRODUCTION**

SPARSE-Rural was formed in the early 1990's originally as a District Council Group under the old ADC prior to the formation of the LGA. Interestingly it was the only SIG specifically referred to in the "Prospectus" for the formation of the LGA. It is probably numerically the largest of the Association's Special Interest Groups.

On the formation of the LGA its membership criteria was extended to cover English Counties, Districts and Unitary Councils and it has a healthy percentage of each in its membership.

It now comprises 110 Local Authorities.

The nature of the membership's 'common interest' is all matters relating to living, working and providing services to communities across Predominantly Rural and Significant Rural England.

The Local Government Funding Formulae and their lack of recognition of the costs associated with settlement patterns and population dispersal was the Group's main area of work until the late 1990's when issues relating to service delivery in our member's areas became of equal focus. We have worked particularly hard the past year through our detailed research and work with an effective All Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services and with a Parliamentary Rural Fair Shares Group formed by Graham Stuart MP the current Chair of the APPG.

In the early 2000's the Group (together with the then Commission for Rural Communities) sponsored the creation of a 'sister' organisation – The Rural Services Partnership (RSP) (now a not for dividend company Limited by Guarantee). The RSP has some 80 subscribing members in England from across the non local authority public services, and also from rural interest groups from the private and voluntary sectors.

When the two organisations work together, which they do a lot of the time, they do so as the Rural Services Network (RSN), one of very few nationwide specifically rural organisations still operating in England .

The RSN also has a Community Group with extensive membership from Parish/Town Councils, Primary Schools, local Chambers of Commerce etc. Membership is free to Parishes, Schools and Organisations in SPARSE-Rural member authority areas but there is a small charge where this is not the case. This group is extensive and has nearly 9,000 contacts.

We plan in conjunction with 6 of the former Commissioners of the former Commission for Rural Communities and two of our Consultants to form an extra organisation standing apart from our representational work and dealing primarily with rural research. This working arrangement will be termed 'Rural England'. It will constitute a further body in the Rural Services Network cluster and be accountable to the RSN Executive.

The network now has four main purposes:

- **Representing** the case for a better deal for rural service provision
- **Exchanging** useful and relevant information
- **Developing and sharing** best practice
- **Researching rural issues**

The Rural Services Network exists to ensure services delivered to the communities of Rural England are as strong and as effective as possible.

## **MEMBERSHIP**

The membership criteria has previously been towards Councils serving Predominantly Rural areas i.e. those with at least 50% of their population living in rural settlements (rural towns, villages, hamlets and dispersed dwellings) as identified in the Office for National Statistics' rural definition and including larger market towns as identified in the Defra classification of local authority districts. We have 94 authorities who are in this classification but because organisations looking specifically at rural interests are now so few we have changed our constitution this year so that the group is designed to cover both the Predominantly Rural classification and the Significant Rural area one where at least 25% of an authorities population is classified as living within an area or settlement classified as rural. A breakdown of our current membership is given at the end of this report

There are currently 110 Authorities in full membership, 13 Unitary Councils, 9 County Councils and 88 District/Borough Councils.

Membership requires a service payment which is £2095 per annum for Districts and Counties with a sliding scale for Unitaries based on population. The membership fee has remained unaltered for the past 5 years.

We believe there are c130 authorities in England possessing common financial interests and these authorities would normally form our catchment for full membership of the group at that subscription.

There are we believe some 170 authorities who it is felt have common performance, rural, socio economic and rural planning interest and they would constitute the most rural local authorities in England. The list of these authorities is attached as an appendix to this report.

The c forty authorities who will not always that common financial aim but have common rural affinity can, it has been decided, enter the Group as Associate

members to take advantage of all the non- financial services offered by the group at a reduced membership fee of £995.

The new position now allows the vast majority of Rural Commission members to take advantage of the Networks services should they so wish.

It is hoped that this new position will allow still closer working and liaison between the Special Interest Group and the Rural Commission.

## **GOVERNANCE**

There are three full membership meetings a year of SPARSE Rural in March, July and the AGM in November. Each meeting of SPARSE Rural is followed by a RSN Meeting (a joint meeting with the RSP).

The LGA's Rural Commission is able, if they wish, to send a representative to these meetings as are each of the LGA's Political Groups.

We seek to meet with Officers of both the LGA and the County Council's Network at least once a year.

We work with the Rural Commission and presented to them this year and we hope to present to their conference at Warwick this September.

The LGA has copies of all Agenda papers and Minutes including our amended constitution.

A small RSN Executive Group which steers the Network also meets three times a year, jointly with the RSP Directors.

The RSN circulates by email weekly news and analysis information and maintains a website [www.rsonline.org.uk](http://www.rsonline.org.uk). The weekly digests etc are currently sent to some 22,000 people a week and we estimate, read by over 45,000 people.

We have commenced both a monthly opportunities e-leaflet and a detailed topic examination bulletins which look at Rural Broadband, Fuel Poverty, and Local Transport issues.

The membership subscriptions fund the Group's work which is carried out by a small team most of whom are located in Tavistock in Devon with specialist consultants brought in where necessary. As with the LGA to maintain operational stability a year's notice of ceasing membership is required by the constitution to be served by the 31<sup>st</sup> March in any year.

The Group is apolitical. There are no Political Group' meetings before our meetings.

## **SERVICES**

We provide a range of services to the membership which are briefly set out below:-

### **IMPROVEMENT AND EFFICIENCY SUPPORT**

#### **Financial Representation**

Our primary area of work relates to arguing the case for the rural premium – the fact that serving a rural area costs more. We want government to recognise that fact across funding formulae and other financial support mechanisms. We are particularly active in this area at this time because we are massively concerned about the impact of the ongoing public expenditure cuts on service levels over the next few years that are clearly already heavily restricted. We have carried out research with LG Futures and Pixel widening and updating work carried out by Rita Hale Associates in 2006-7 and we have been pressing Government hard on the issues identified in relation to the 2013-14 settlement and will continue to do so in relation to 2014-5

#### **Performance Profiling**

Comparison with other rural local authorities allows comparison and evaluation across a range of services. PR, SR and R50 and R80 subsets will be provided.

Working with the 'Service Organisations' RSP membership (such as Police, Fire, Health, Housing Associations and Colleges, where we are seeking to develop groupings) we get to the dynamics of the "total place" and are looking to carry out detailed analysis down to ward level of the place survey.

#### **Best Practice and Innovation**

We help to establish and spread best practice information, forming links with other experts in the delivery of services to rural areas. We are working with universities in the delivery of specific training opportunities relating to Rural Governance and Service Delivery in the most rural areas. We have assisted with a recent meeting between some English Unitary Authorities and a grouping of Welsh Unitary Authorities. We have established a very popular annual programme of rural forums and seminars in every rural region of England which are free for all members.

We do feel that with different United Kingdom national assemblies establishing differing policies in respect of rural areas information exchange between practitioners from the four nations is important and we have set up a group (- the UK Rural Policy and Practitioners Group) with the help of representatives from Cardiff University, Queens University Belfast and the Scottish Agricultural College to allow information exchange and comparison.

It would be excellent to integrate both national organisations and local authority representatives from UK Local Authorities from across the four home nations into this grouping.

## **INFLUENCING**

### **Influencing Parliamentarians**

We helped to establish the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services to provide a unique opportunity for Parliamentarians to focus on rural services and to raise issues in both Houses of Parliament. We provide the Secretariat for this Parliamentary Group

In 2013 it will be having at least 4 meetings as follows:- Finance issues, (April) Transport, (May) Housing (September) and Health (November) are all programmed.

We are also involved with the Parliamentary Rural Fair Share Group mentioned above.

### **Annual Report on State of Rural Services**

We produced an annual report detailing the position of a range of rural services, putting service delivery under a national and local microscope. This is now the only publication seeking to capture the rural situation on a year by year basis.

### **Calls for Evidence/ Panels**

We inform Government and those advising Government about the situation appertaining to rural service delivery from the perspective of both the service provider and rural communities. We are also working with the former Chief Executive of the Commission for Rural Communities, Jon Carling, to see whether it is possible to a number of formal rural panels to assist the establishment of rural views and perspectives both generally and on issues of the moment

Our membership has provided a lot of the evidence cited by a number of organisations in their reports to Government and in its responses to various government consultations etc.

## **NETWORKING**

We are certain that slimmed down local government needs more and more networking opportunities. With our RSP and Community contacts we do feel we can play a strong part here and we wish to establish new networks specialising on rural experience and expertise in the Environmental Health, Public Health, Housing, Economic Development, and Community Safety areas. We hope our initiatives in these areas will become increasingly evident.

## **INFORMING**

### **Rural Economy**

Including the regional rural seminars, early bird digests on rural legislation and issues, our economic profiling service and our Rural England consultancy service.

### **Community Access and Consultation**

We work with others to share best practice and generate investigations about “village hubs”, the role of Market Towns, rural broadband and fuel poverty etc.

### **Research and Analysis**

We hope that information we collect on rural service delivery and financial profiling analysed and collated with national statistics enables our member authorities to stay ahead.

### **Rural News and Information Service**

We provide rural news as it happens – on a weekly and monthly basis through our email newsletters and web forums.

### **RURAL COALITION**

We are members of the Rural Coalition.

### **CONCORDATS**

We have working concordats with the RCPU at Defra, with the National Trust, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Countryside and Community Research Institute in Gloucester and with the Chartered Institute of Housing. We hope that by close working with these organisations our overall performance and research packages can be continually improved.

### **SPECIAL SERVICE GROUPS WITHIN OUR SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP**

Where need is presented to us for new groupings in relation to specific rural service areas we are establishing as advised special service groups within the SPARSE Rural special interest group. These have been requested in relation to Fire and Rescue Services by 10 Rural Fire Authorities leading to a Rural Fire and Rescue Group and by a number of Unitary Authorities keen to establish a Rural Unitary Council Group. These are likely to be formally agreed by our next Main Meeting in July.

### **OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2013 AND BEYOND**

For SPARSE-Rural our first priority will remain the funding formulae and the impact of the massive public expenditure reductions and their impact on public services. We need to be in continual dialogue with Government in relation to this.

For the RSN our priorities will be to seek to influence Government and Policy Makers across a whole range of issues facing rural service providers and

communities. We have set these out in a “Rural Services Manifesto” which we launched around the 2010 election and which will be revised as we run up to 2015. We have also assisted in the formation of a Parliamentary Rural Fair Share Group which has involved over 50 MPs.

With the demise of the Regional Development Agencies and the Commission for Rural Communities we have sought to introduce a number of important initiatives over the past two years.

- Service Groupings in relation to individual RSP member service areas. Housing, Health, Fire, Community Safety, Transport Groups are all being established.

Creating an array of networking opportunities back into our SPARSE Rural member authorities through the links formed is very clearly the much needed response to the austerity measures. In a sense we wish to create a ‘virtual authority’ with an accompanying bank of experience in this way.

- A system of area forums and seminars across every rural region in England.
- A Rural Policy and Practitioners Group operating across the United Kingdom examining current rural issues and exemplifying best practice.
- A Rural England Service- seeking to undertake as much rural research and statistical investigation as possible

It is our wish to establish an extensive network to assist rural areas across England in what are clearly extremely difficult days. Step by step we wish to strengthen and widen that network to assist rural areas in these really difficult times.

Roger Begy, OBE

Chairman

Graham Biggs, MBE

Chief Executive

## Appendix (Those in red are not currently members)

### *Predominantly Rural District and Unitary Authorities (those in red are non members)*

Allerdale, Aylesbury Vale, Babergh, Bassetlaw, Braintree, Breckland, **Central Bedfordshire**, Cheshire East, Chichester, Copeland, Cornwall Cotswold, Craven, Daventry, Derbyshire Dales, Dover, Durham, East Cambridgeshire, East Devon, **East Dorset**, East Lindsey, **East Hampshire**, East Northamptonshire, East Riding of Yorkshire, Eden, Fenland, Forest Heath, Forest of Dean, Hambleton, Harborough, Herefordshire, **High Peak**, Horsham, **Huntingdonshire**, Isle of Wight, **Isles of Scilly**, Kings Lynn and West Norfolk, Lewes, Lichfield, Maldon, Malvern Hills, Mendip, Mid Devon, Mid Suffolk, Mid Sussex, Newark and Sherwood, North Devon, **North East Derbyshire**, North Dorset, North Kesteven, North Lincolnshire, North Norfolk, North Somerset, North Warwickshire, North West Leicestershire, North Yorkshire, Northumberland, Purbeck, Ribble Valley, Richmondshire, Rother, **Rushcliffe**, Rutland, Ryedale, Selby, Sedgemoor, Sevenoaks, Shropshire, **South Bucks**, South Cambridgeshire, South Hams, South Holland, South Kesteven, South Lakeland, South Norfolk, South Northamptonshire, South Oxfordshire, South Somerset, **Staffordshire Moorlands**, St Edmundsbury, Stratford on Avon, Suffolk Coastal, Stroud, Teignbridge, Torridge, **Tandridge**, Tendring, Tewkesbury, **Tonbridge and Malling**, Uttlesford, Vale of White Horse, **Waverley**, Wealden, West Devon, West Dorset, **West Lancashire**, West Lindsey, West Oxfordshire, West Somerset, Wiltshire, **Winchester**, Wychavon.

### *Predominantly Rural Shire Counties*

Cambridgeshire Cumbria, Devon, **Dorset**, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Oxfordshire, Somerset, Suffolk.

### *Significant Rural District and Unitary Authorities identified as having strong financial case affinity*

Ashford, **Basingstoke and Deane**, Boston, **Bath and North East Somerset**, Broadland, Carlisle, Cherwell, **Cheshire West and Chester**, East Hertfordshire, **East Staffordshire**, **Harrogate**, Hinckley and Bosworth, **Mole Valley**, New Forest, **Redcar and Cleveland**, Rugby, Scarborough, Shepway, South Derbyshire, South Staffordshire, Stafford, Taunton Deane, **Tunbridge Wells**, **West Berkshire**, **Wyre Forest**

### *Significant Rural Districts with rural affinity*

**Amber Valley**, **Bedford**, **Brentwood**, **Bromsgrove**, **Cannock Chase**, **Calderdale**, **Charnwood**, **Chelmsford**, **Chiltern**, **Colchester**, **Epping Forest**, **Great Yarmouth**, **Guildford**, **Hart**, **Hertsmere**, **Kettering**, **Lancaster**, **Maidstone**, **North Hertfordshire**, **Redcar and Cleveland**, **St Albans**, **Swale**, **Warwick**, **Wellingborough**, **Wycombe**.

### *Significant Rural Shire Counties*

**Buckinghamshire**, **Derbyshire**, **Essex**, **East Sussex**, **Gloucestershire**, **Hampshire**, **Kent**, **Lancashire**, **Leicestershire**, **Northamptonshire**, **Nottinghamshire**, **Staffordshire**, **West Sussex**, **Warwickshire**, **Worcestershire**.