

## Note of last SPARSE Rural Special Interest Group meeting

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**Title:** SPARSE Rural Special Interest Group  
**Date:** Monday 17 March 2014  
**Venue:** Westminster Suite, 8th Floor, Local Government House, Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ

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### Attendance:

Janice Banks (ACRE); Cllr Leslie Ken (Bath and North East Somerset); Cllr Raymond Singleton-McGuire (Boston BC); Cllr Myles Cullen (Chichester DC); Cllr Chris Knowles-Fitton (Craven DC); Cllr Hilary Carrick (Cumbria CC); Cllr Paul Diviani (East Devon DC); Cllr Ken Potter (East Devon DC); Cllr Rupert Reichhold (East Northamptonshire DC); Cllr Gordon Nicholson (Eden DC); Cllr Mary Robinson (Eden DC); Adrian Maunders (English Rural Housing Alliance); Cllr Roger Phillips (Herefordshire Council); Cllr Nick Daubney (Kings Lynn and West Norfolk BC); Cllr Lewis Strange (Lincolnshire CC); Dawn Garton (Melton BC); Michael Parker (National Farmers Union); Les Britzman (Norfolk Fire & Rescue Service); Cllr David Worden (North Devon DC); Cllr Lindsey Cawrey (North Kesteven DC); Cllr Robert Heseltine (North Yorkshire CC); Andrea DeGama (Post Office); Cllr John Blackie (Richmondshire DC); Cllr Jane Mortimer (Scarborough BC); Cllr Cameron Clark (Sevenoaks DC); Cllr Cecilia Motley (Shropshire Council); John Redmond (Shropshire Council); Cllr Madge Shineton (Shropshire Council); Cllr Jeremy Savage (South Norfolk DC); Cllr Carole Clarke (South Northamptonshire DC); William Jacobs (South Oxfordshire DC); Cllr Peter Stevens (St Edmundsbury DC); Nicola Swinnerton (Staffordshire CC); Cllr Owen Bierley (West Lindsey DC); Cllr Roger Begy (Rutland CC).

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

### Apologies for absence:

Barbara Shaw (Banbury CAB); Stewart Horne (BIP West Devon); Chris Fleetham (Braintree DC); Cllr Les Ford (Cheshire West & Chester Council); Revd Richard Kirlew (Church in Wales); Cllr Alex Folkes (Cornwall Council); Ian Cartwright (Cumbria Fire & Rescue Service); Cllr John Upsell (East Lindsey DC); Ruth McArthur (Exmoor National Park); Peter Shipp (EYMS Group); David Webb (Federation of Small Businesses); Derrick Haley (Mid Suffolk DC); Paul Hook (National Federation of Sub-Postmasters); Martyn Emberson (Northamptonshire Fire & Rescue Service); Malcolm Leaming (Oxfordshire Association of Parish Councils); Cllr Rodney Rose (Oxfordshire CC); Cllr Peter Fleming (Sevenoaks DC); Cllr Peter Thornton (South Lakeland DC); Cllr Philip Sanders (West Devon BC); Cllr Jane Scott (Wiltshire Council).

Item	Decisions and actions	Action
1	<b>Apologies for absence</b>  Cllr Motley welcomed all to the meeting.  <i>Apologies were noted and would appear in the minutes.</i>	

## **2 Minutes of the last full meeting - 18th November 2013**

David Inman invited more members to join the rural sounding board as there were still vacancies.

Graham Biggs informed members that work has begun on the first draft of the rural manifesto and Brian Wilson is consulting across the network on key themes. The intention is to present the manifesto to the AGM.

*The minutes of the last full meeting were agreed.*

## **3 Minutes of the Executive Meeting - 27th January 2014**

*The minutes of the last Executive Meeting were agreed.*

## **4 Fairer Funding/Rural Fair Share Campaign**

Graham Biggs informed the group that he and David Inman will be meeting with the Chair of the Fair Share Campaign on 3 April to discuss future activities/tactics and the opportunities presented by the proposed joint study into rural service costs between DCLG and DEFRA.

## **5 Finance Settlement Update**

Dan Bates reported to members on the Local Government finance settlement and the effect of this in creating and increasing ESSSA. He also explained how campaigning had led to £2 million extra being added to what ESSSA has now become, namely the Rural Services Delivery Grant in the final settlement. He also reported on discussions with Brandon Lewis MP, who is keen to commission a study between DCLG and DEFRA on additional rural costs.

Graham Biggs told members that officers had also strongly argued that this study should not just focus on super-sparse authorities but needs to look at the whole continuum of costs.

Cllr Motley reported that her authority has received extra funding for education after speaking to David Laws MP last year and believes that things are moving in the right direction. RSN and what it represented is being regarded with more seriousness by politicians.

Dan Bates agreed and added that pressure needs to be sustained.

## **6 Budget**

Graham Biggs presented the budget, explaining the surplus. Payment of subscriptions is at a normal level. A revised budget would be taken to the next Executive meeting.

Members discussed:

- Sending out a letter to all authorities describing the benefit of RSN

- membership.
- Identifying rural MPs not part of the Fair Share Council.

## **7 Post Office Transformation Programme**

Andrea Da Gama from the Government & Public Affairs department at Post Office Ltd. presented to members about the Post Office transformation programme.

Andrea explained that the service is modernising to meet the changing needs of its customers. She said the Post Office is now committed to maintaining the current size of its branch network, and that as part of the new Post Office Strategy and additional government funding (announced in November), the business is aiming to transform all its branches by 2018 and will also provide support for those community Post Office branches that are the last shop in the village. Andrea said the Post Office was also investing in its network of Crown branches.

Under the transformation programme launched in 2012, there are the following types of Post Office branches:

1. Crown Branches - these are the larger town/city centre type branches directly managed by the Post Office, and providing a full range of services
2. Post Office Main – these are the modernised larger agency branches providing a full range of services such as financial services at a dedicated Post Office counter, often for longer hours.
3. Post Office Local – modernised smaller agency branch where the Post Office is integrated with a retail business and therefore able to offer the same opening hours.
4. Community Branches: c,3,400 branches that have been identified as the last shop in the village, where there is no other retailer within half a mile. These branches will be protected and £20 million investment has been earmarked for these to improve their sustainability.
5. Outreach Services –this includes the mobile service, partner service, hosted service, and home service.

Andrea described the challenges the Post Office is facing and how the transformation programme is allowing them to respond to these. She said that initial feedback on the changes has been mainly positive and outlined future changes that the Post Office is planning as part of the transformation programme, including expanding the range of financial services currently offered, and the launch of its Community Enterprise Fund in partnership with Cabinet Office and DCLG.

Members discussed:

- Concern around the level of service at outreach branches compared to services in a post office branch.
- The reduction of postmasters' income and the effect on service.
- Concern that lack of broadband in rural areas will hamper planned

technological advances such as ID verification.

- Whether there is dialogue between the Post Office and government about current accounts for universal credit.
- Mixed messages received from different parts of the Post Office organisation.

## **8 Rural Proofing**

Graham Biggs reported that he and David Inman had met with Lord Cameron and Lord Teverson to discuss concerns on the various funding formula.

## **9 Report on the RSP Service Groups**

David Inman informed members that RSP Service Groups have now been set up in all areas except transport. The challenge now is to ensure sufficient income to support activity and meet each group's targets:

- It is key for the Housing Group to secure subscriptions from Community based Housing Associations.
- Health has started to build up a network at the health annual conference and is examining establishing a clinical commissioning/public health sub group across rural areas.
- Crime is working with PCCs to set up a formal network and working to secure a Home Office grant.
- Fire has also now begun to build up a network at the fire conference.

## **10 Community Group**

### **Bip West Devon – Universal Credit & the Self Employed**

Michael Porter from the NFU explained to members that the Universal Credit assessment period of one calendar month, is likely to have an adverse effect on rural communities affecting farmers, self-employed people and people in the tourism industry. Many people have fluctuations in income from month to month which are not taken into account for the purposes of Universal Credit. There are also concerns that people may have dips in income throughout the year leading to them being assessed below the minimum income floor, which could lead people to be forced into finding a second job or to give up self-employment altogether. This is a particular concern for those employed as farmers who may also have to find alternative homes for their families, as this will be tied into the farm.

The Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI) have met with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to discuss the possibility of a fairer method of assessment, looking at spreading income and

expenditure assessment over a year rather than monthly. These discussions are still on going.

Members discussed:

- Concern around external factors, such as supermarket pricing, adding extra burdens on farmer's income and complicating universal credit assessment.
- The need consider how annual Tax Credit assessments will work alongside the Universal Credit monthly assessment.
- The need to ensure local conditions and issues are taken into account.

Cllr Motley thanked Michael Porter for his presentation and asked him to keep the Rural Services Network updated on the progress with DWP.

Items 10b and 10c were considered more appropriate to be discussed at a local level and were therefore noted.

## **11 Items from the Long Grass**

Members discussed concern around difficulties for residents who cannot access benefits due to lack of post offices in rural areas. David Inman proposed to arrange discussions between members and the post office once a year, in order to join up thinking. Members also raised the possibility of trying the influence the post office contract review in 2015 and of speaking to the Federation of Sub Postmasters.

Members discussed whether to pull together case studies on the effect of government cuts to present to DCLG and shared some examples from their local areas. Dan Bates suggested setting up a short survey to gather members' views on the impact.