

## Note of last SPARSE Rural Special Interest Group (Rural Assembly Sub-SIG) meeting

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<b>Title:</b>	SPARSE Rural Special Interest Group – The Rural Assembly Meeting
<b>Date:</b>	Monday 11 July 2016
<b>Venue:</b>	Westminster Suite, 8th Floor, Local Government House, Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ

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Item	Decisions and actions	Action
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**1 Note of the Previous Meeting**

The Chair welcomed members to the meeting..

**Decision**

Members agreed the minutes of the 11<sup>th</sup> April 2016 meeting.

**2 Minutes of the Executive Meeting - 20th June 2016**

**Decision**

Members noted the minutes of the 20<sup>th</sup> June 2016 Executive Meeting.

**3 Rural Development Programme**

Andy Dean, Assistant Director of the Rural Services Network (RSN), updated members on the ERDP (rural development programme) meeting with DEFRA. The following commitments were made on EU funding:

- There will be no change in short-term processing of EU claims.
- There will be no future financial commitments made until the uncertainty over EU funding has been resolved.

Members responded with the following comments:

- Brexit should not affect the availability of funding, and Defra should follow the Prime Minister's guidance of business as usual.
- A letter should be drafted ASAP seeking urgent clarification on EU funding and timescales from the relevant Minister at Defra. Also an article should be prepared for LG First Magazine on this topic.

**Action**

Andy Dean to draft the letter to the Minister, and the article for First Magazine.

#### **4 Defra LEP roundtable update**

Andy Dean updated members on the latest meeting between LEPs and Defra of which the RSN is an attendee, including:

- There was much discussion on the uncertainty around EU funding and a call for more clarity for both short and long-term projects.
- Growth pilots were received well by Defra.
- There was an update on mobile infrastructure including the current national network coverage statistics, 5G, mast sharing proposals, and EE's plans for micro networks which promise to improve rural mobile coverage.
- There was a presentation on a pending promotion for rural food and drink tourism.

Members responded with the following comments:

- Mobile coverage for rural areas is poor despite Defra promises for ten years. This is having a detrimental effect on businesses.
- The statistics on mobile and broadband coverage are distorted by the differences in population densities between rural and urban areas.
- EE have mentioned plans to utilise the emergency airwaves service to extend some networks. This seems like a promising idea worth pursuing.
- Government plans for 2G and 3G networks are not ambitious enough and should be upgraded to 4G and 5G.
- The RSN should explore what proportion of rural areas have good mobile and broadband coverage to avoid using statistics distorted by urban area populations.

#### **Action**

Graham Biggs agreed to survey RSN members on the mobile and broadband coverage in members' rural areas and report the findings at the next Sparse meeting.

#### **5 Election of Councillors to fill current vacancies until the AGM**

The Chair updated the group on the two candidates filling the Vice Chair vacancies until the AGM.

#### **Decision**

**The following be appointed until the next AGM**

1. Vice Chair South East; Cllr Janet Duncton from West Sussex County Council
2. Vice Chair Without Portfolio; Cllr Sue Sanderson from Cubria County Council

## **6 Budget Report**

Graham Biggs, updated members on the budget report, including: receipt of membership subs being up slightly in comparison with the same period last year, and that there are large consultancy fees expected due to the work around the implications of 100% Business Rates Retention

### **Decision**

Members agreed the budget.

## **7 The Big Debate - Brexit**

The Chair stated the importance of rural areas voicing their concerns and priorities for a post-Brexit deal, focussing on what's important for rural councils and communities.

Members responded with the following comments:

- A comprehensive list of what EU funding rural areas currently benefit from would be advantageous for beginning post-Brexit negotiations.
- EU level regulations which disadvantage rural authorities should be considered in any forward looking objectives.
- Many farmers need both continuity of the levels of funding and subsidies as received from the EU, and assurances of no new restrictions on migrant labour in order to remain sustainable businesses.
- Agricultural bureaucracy is an excessive burden on farmers and needs reviewing post-Brexit..
- There is an opportunity to lobby for a more comprehensive devolution package as a consequence of Brexit which should not be overlooked.
- Affordable housing in rural areas should form a part of the post Brexit considerations. This may be an ideal time to initiate a thorough review of rural areas, their funding, and the forces of change they are, and will be subject to.

Graham Biggs, responded to these comments stating that it would be advantageous to release a statement from the Sparse Group over the next few weeks voicing the group's concerns over financial stability for rural areas, especially those hardest hit in the austerity programme since 2010. Furthermore, that the group should support the LGA, who has a place at the table for Brexit negotiations.

Graham Biggs also agreed with the proposition that the Government should launch a thorough review of the needs of rural areas. The Chair agreed this point and suggested that these ideas be fed into the rural conference.

## **8 Ofcom consultation**

The Chair introduced the report followed by Graham Biggs stating that the RSN had responded to the report which is lacking in multiple key areas.

### Decision

Members noted the RSN response to the Ofcom report.

## **9 RSN Events – the Rural Conference**

Graham Biggs updated members on the plans for conference, including a move to include more Brexit discussion and speakers towards this end in light of the referendum result.

The Chair asked members to ensure that they attend the rural conference and promote the event in their councils to both members and officers. The Chair also agreed to send a letter to RSN members promoting the conference.

### Decision

Members noted the decision to change the conference programme to better reflect the Brexit decision, and the Chair agreed to send promotional letters to RSN members.

## **10 Report on RSP Service Groups**

Graham Biggs updated members on the following RSN service groups:

- a) Housing** – Andy Dean, will be attending the Rural Housing Conference and will update members in due course.
- b) Health** – the decision has been taken to run the Health Network as a free service for a fixed term in order to build an extensive database. There will however, be a health conference in January/February 2017, which will offset some of the lost revenue.
- c) Crime** – the Rural Crime Network's (RCN) AGM is to be held next week, from which a decision as to its future work programme is expected. Furthermore, the RCN has funded research into the funding formula for the police which presently disadvantages rural forces.
- d) Fire** – in an upcoming meeting of the Fire Group, there is an expectation that the group's views on Business Rate Retention will be explored.
- e) Transport** – the transport agenda is pursued through the LGA's Transport special interest group which sends out a quarterly bulletin.

### Decision

Members noted the update.