

Minutes of the Meeting of the RSN Executive held on Monday 22nd June 2015 at the LGA London

Present – Cecilia Motley, (Chair), Robert Heseltine (Senior Vice Chair), Cllr Lewis Strange, Cllr Hilary Carrick, Cllr Peter Stevens, Cllr Peter Thornton, (Vice Chairs) Stewart Horne (BIP), Rev R Kirlew (Community).

Officers -Graham Biggs, David Inman, Andy Dean, Brian Wilson, Matt Smith (Herefordshire Council)

Apologies –Cllr Gordon Nicolson OBE, Cllr Roger Begy)OBE, Cllr Adam Paynter, Cllr Derrick Haley, John Birtwistle (First), Helen Briggs (Rutland DC).

The Rural CAB Group would be contacted to seek to secure a replacement Community representative.

1. Minutes of the Executive Meeting held on 19th January 2015.

Add Cllr Strange to the list of Attendances.

Agreed as a correct record.

2. Minutes of the Main Meeting held on 13th April 2015.

Add Cllr Heseltine and Cllr Stevens to the list of Attendances.

Agreed as a correct record.

3. Agenda Main Meeting:-

It was decided this would include:

Fairer Funding (morning)

Manifestos, Neil Parish (EFRA Select Committee), Devolution, Royal Mail Presentation, Buses Bill, Housing Presentation (afternoon).

4. Fairer Funding.

Graham detailed the position arrived at with Graham Stuart. Emphasis for the immediate future had to be on distribution mechanisms. As in the Manifesto, it would (subject to the agreement of the Rural Fair Share Campaign MPs) be the restoration of the 2012 consultative pre damped position with the £247 million (less the circa 25% which was not damped away) then suggested going to 170 Authorities restored instead of being 75% damped. It should be restored via RSDG initially in three staged payments, ideally at £60 million per year. Investigation should be made of the Business Rates distributive mechanism and their likely consequences. The campaign would concentrate on RSDG until 2016 and then switch to Business Rates.

A meeting of the newly constituted Rural Fair Share Group was planned before the recess.

5. Manifestos.

The ACRE Manifesto largely ran along parallel lines to the RSN. The NALC one also had similarities. It was agreed that should Principal Councils not approve Parishing on a request for that to occur the NALC suggestion that there should be right of appeal to DCLG was agreeable.

The Conservative Manifesto avoided discussion of rural funding issues and that was felt disappointing in that regard. The Executive wanted to see an exemption in respect of rural areas on the Right to Buy for Housing Association tenants (settlements of 3000 or less population).

- 6.** The new APPG and the Fairer Funding Parliamentary Group. Twin membership of 58 members had been registered for the re-established groups with 25 of the new MPs involved. There were 16 registered observers. Further work needed to be undertaken with 24 new rural members and with returning rural MPs who were not members. Member Authorities would be written to asking them to contact these MPs to encourage them to join.

The Executive would be supplied with the new list.

7. English Devolution

The topic had been looked at in detail by the LGA's People and Places Board but it remained early days. An agreed interim LGA position had been arrived at involving CCN and DCN. A position encouraging organic growth to devolution measures was currently favoured. This would be a major item on the Rural Assembly Agenda of the 13th of July.

8. Blue Sky Considerations

It was agreed that some 12 detailed Policy Notes prepared mainly by Brian Wilson should be established on the website so if Authorities were considering any of these topics the thoughts and position of RSN on topics was spelt out publicly in detail. Member Scrutiny Committees would be written to on this new service and encouraged to carry out reviews in four suggested areas, allowing these areas to receive informed consideration in even more detail. When reports were received, these would be added to the website as well under the briefing notes.

The number of document reviews carried out by Brian would, in future, be restricted to four per year instead of the current monthly service.

9. Rural Broadband

Matt Smith detailed his understanding of the position to the group detailing some of his presentation to a recent APPG.
(Slides incorporated with these Minutes).

His perception was that matters were not in a good position. Targets had slipped quite badly, the Conservative Manifesto was not as decisive as had been hoped and BT appeared to be too often taking entirely commercial positions irrespective of contracted positions.

Installation, where it had occurred, lacked publicity and many people wrongly assumed connection was automatic or free. Too often areas were shown as receiving broadband when local features meant that many properties were in fact not getting service. Take up rates were, therefore, lower than had been expected. Take up in rural areas was generally good however when service was available. Wireless and satellite options for areas where no fibre connection currently exists had technical limitations that made certain online applications difficult. BT, it was felt, had made some retraction back to urban areas and the availability of accurate information detailing physical progress and availability of superfast broadband at a detailed level was proving very problematic in assessing the actual position. Uploading was really slow still, despite schemes. As an example of the various problems encountered and the dearth of coverage in very rural areas Defra had been forced to return to a paper farming grant system.

The State Aid derogation for the BDIUK project runs out at the end of the month and further state aid was being held up because there was concern that existed funded schemes had not complied with their claimed objectives. The BT claims for fibre to remote node schemes were felt to be overstated due to the power costs involved and lack of any actual completed research.

It was felt by the Executive there had been a significant lack in the flexibility required if rural areas were to be given a fair chance and the resulting position was extremely unfortunate.

The Executive decided to issue a comprehensive briefing note to a newly constituted Broadband APPG that Matt and Brian would work on together.

10. Budget for 2014-15/2015-16

The satisfactory Budget position as presented by Graham was agreed.

11. Budget for Rural England. A separate Budget for Rural England was agreed as detailed.

12. Going Forward

David presented this membership report which followed on from consideration given to this item at the last meeting.

RSN were now, with ACRE, the only national representative bodies for rural issues in England as a whole. Membership at RSN extended to some 60% of Councils with a rural interest and in these circumstances there had to be a

plan to involve theoretically all Authorities with such an interest. The report sought to establish categories to allow that to happen.

- (a) Ten County Councils still remained non- members. They had been approached in the past month.
- (b) A further 30 District or Unitary Authorities (listed in report) would be approached over the summer seeking to secure their involvement in the Rural Assembly.
- (c) There were a further 60 Authorities (also listed in the report) with limited, but identifiable, rural areas. On the basis that less than 20 of their parishes had rural output areas, it was recognised that they would not have any overriding rural interest as an Authority. These Authorities would therefore be offered Associate involvement for a sum of £25 per parish based on the multiplier of the number of their parishes with a rural interest. The service in these cases would only involve Economic Development departments and the local community interests.
- (d) The report was agreed. It would therefore, in future be theoretically possible for all English Authorities with a rural interest to have some defined form of relationship with RSN

13. Rural Conference 8th/9th September

The Conference which this year would be run solely by RSN would take place in Cheltenham. The University of Gloucestershire (CCRI) had offered free accommodation and were very much thanked by the Group. The Conference needed therefore to have in the region of 50 delegates to break even. Even at this comparatively early stage, 26 bookings had been received. It was hoped Rory Stewart M.P. would be the keynote speaker as DEFRA Minister.

14. Rural Health Conference

This had been planned for 11th June in Truro but due to lack of take up had been postponed. However, it would now be held later in the year, probably in a London location.

15. Rural Housing Conference

This event was being held in the House of Lords on the 9th July. It was already over-subscribed and 60 attendees were anticipated.

16. Rural Classifications

Changes to the classifications had been made by the Defra Working Group. (The new draft leaflet is attached to these Minutes.)

It had been agreed by Defra that documentation would now include a table designed to reflect rural area as well as the classifications which were based solely on overall inhabitant settlement patterns.

17. RSN Current Membership Position

The Group currently had an overall membership of 150 Authorities, 126 in SPARSE Rural (including the Rural Assembly) and 24 Authorities solely in the Rural Assembly. The RSP membership remained at circa 100.

18. Report back from the Rural England meeting.

The meeting had been very well attended by Stakeholders. Detailed briefs for the State of Rural Services report and the Rural Vulnerability (as affecting older people) report had been agreed. The depth of preparatory work for these reports was dependent on private sector funding and this was being sought. Currently ten firms had agreed to be involved and it was hoped to take that number to around 30.

19. ACRE

There had been a recent ACRE reorganisation. A meeting was due to be held with the new Interim Chief Executive shortly about continued attempts to secure the strongest possible links. A report would be brought back to the next Executive.

20. Transport Group

The Executive received a report on recent developments towards the establishment of a defined group.

It was agreed that representation should be made to government regarding the rumoured withdrawal of Bus Services Operators Grant.

21. Annual Report to the LGA

This report was circulated for information.

The meeting terminated at 2.45pm