

Notes of SPARSE Rural Special Interest Group meeting 30 January 2017

Title: SPARSE Rural Special Interest Group

Date: 30 January 2017

Venue: City of Westminster Archives Centre, London

Attendance:

An attendance list is attached as Appendix A to this note.

Apologies for absence:

A list of apologies is attached as Appendix B to this note.

Minutes from SPARSE Rural SIG AGM (21 November 2016)

The notes of the AGM were approved.

Minutes from Executive meeting (9 January 2017)

The notes of the Executive were approved.

Provisional Settlement

Dan Bates reprised a presentation given to MPs in Parliament House earlier in January. The following points were noted:

- Rural taxpayers will pay higher costs and endure higher council tax.
- The move by the government to include the Council Tax base had resulted in higher cuts in rural areas compared to urban.
- Transition grant had so far remained the same this year and the Rural Services Delivery Grant (RSDG) is falling. This means that the gap is bigger with rural authorities suffering a larger reduction than urban authorities.
- The cumulative loss due to the factoring of council tax into grant far outweighs RSDG – a loss of £242 million across predominantly rural Local authorities.
- The effective government policy is that:
 - **rural** taxpayers will pay much higher and increasing levels of Council Tax to fund local services;
 - **rural** taxpayers will pay for a much greater proportion of the additional resources required to address the Adult Social Care crisis.
- Individual analyses will be available from RSN for each local authority over the coming days and will be sent to both members and Fair Share Group MPs.
- Additional Social Care resources – Improved Better Care Fund, Adult Social Care Support Grant (diverted from New Homes Bonus) and additional flexibility on Adult

Social Care Council Tax Precept – have resulted in funds flowing into urban areas whilst in rural areas this will be funded largely from increased Council Tax. The effective government policy is that:

- **rural** taxpayers will pay for a much greater proportion of the additional resources required to address the Adult Social Care crisis.

At the end of the ensuing discussion it was concluded that whilst many local authorities are approaching the generation of increased income and reduced costs with great innovation, the fact remains that available funds from government should be distributed fairly. This point should be pursued vigorously by everyone with their local MPs.

Rural Fair Share Group

Graham Biggs updated the meeting on the progress made with the Rural Fair Share Group. Following the appointment of Graham Stuart as a whip, a new chair and members had been appointed in October. The RSN chair and officials met with James Heappy (chair of Fair Shares Group) and Steve Double on 9 January 2017 followed by a meeting of the Group attended by 20 MPs/MP researchers. MPs noted that this year they were receiving little pressure from their respective local authorities with regard to the provisional settlement.

Other meetings had also taken place including a meeting between the RSN chair and officials and the Local Government Minister and there was a forthcoming meeting of several conservative MPs with the Secretary of State to which Graham Biggs and Dan Bates had been invited to attend.

It was agreed that following the success of last year – Transition Grant for 2 years and RSDG front end loaded – 2017/18 should be used as a period to identify where cuts will fall next year and paint a clear picture of the consequences of these cuts. This would require the provision of information from member local authorities. It was noted that, in some cases, this information may be provided on an anonymous basis due to need to address different audiences with these key messages.

It was agreed that this form the main topic for the July SPARSE meeting and that local authority treasurers also be invited to this meeting.

Future Directions report

It was agreed that regular updates are provided to the group with regard to progress with elements of this report with a focus on specific issues at each meeting (within the scope of resources available).

The Sparse Rural meetings would in future look at the public finance situation across the spectrum of public sector services but clearly detailed work to try to improve any position could only be undertaken if resource became available to take such work forward. Kerry Booth and Dan Worth would be involved in this overview work.

Meetings were taking place with the University of Gloucestershire about a possible 'Rural Meeting' very two years to arrive at consensus views on issues affecting rural areas. Reports would be given to the Rural Assembly on this work.

It was noted that a meeting had been set up with CCN, DCN, ACRE & NALC to explore whether a collective view can be achieved to provide a strong single rural voice in relation to Brexit. If successful, there will be a second round of discussions with the CLA, NFU and other potential partners. West Lindsey's Chief Executive has kindly offered support with this work.

Business Rate retention

It was noted that a number of pilots have gone forward (all involving administrations involved in devolution). These are the forerunners of the full business rate retention system. Revenue Support Grant, RSDG, Highways maintenance, Integrated Transport Block, Bus Operators Grant are all transferring as part of the pilots (mostly transport funding) along with other elements including Local Growth Fund.

It was further noted that the Local Government Finance Bill has been published and that there is currently no planned joint work with DCN/CCN on the business rates issues at present.

Vulnerability

David Inman introduced this report emphasising the huge impact on rural areas of both an ageing population whilst at the same time a reduction in the number of young people remaining in rural areas.

It was suggested that focussed discussion concerning rural vulnerability takes place twice per annum prior to the Rural Assembly meetings at the Health and Social Care Meetings and that a 'Rural Vulnerability day' is sought to be organised in parliament each year.

The need to build on 'safeguarding' work which already takes place on a limited basis with utility companies supporting Rural England was emphasised. Far more detailed proposals (and accompanying leaflet illustrating them) were circulated. These it was considered would achieve a concentrated programme of work with Power Distributors, Power Providers and Water Companies as the right way for this increasing problem to be tackled. The proposals were formally agreed. It was acknowledged however that the scale of work able to be undertaken would have to be determined by the level of resource raised from the utility companies but every effort would be made to make this a successful appeal.

Any Other Business

- The chairman raised concerns regarding the impact of cuts on schools with small numbers and it was acknowledged that the picture with regard to education was very uneven across local authorities.

- It was noted that many rural businesses were suffering significant increases in business rate charges, an issue recently highlighted by a Countryside Alliance press release. It was agreed that Graham Biggs draft a press release from RSN after the meeting.
- It was agree that RSN support a motion developed by West Lindsey District Council requesting a rural weighting in relation to rural GPs.
- It was also noted that £47 million of the £60 million Community Housing Fund announced by government on 23 December 2016 had been allocated to RSN member local authorities.

Dates for next meetings

RSN Executive	– Monday 13 March
Social care & health group	– Monday 10 April
Rural Assembly	– Monday 10 April
Executive	– Monday 12 June
SPARSE Rural	– Monday 10 July
Executive	– Monday 25 September
Social care & health group	– Monday 20 November
RSN, Rural Assembly & RSP AGMs	– Monday 20 November

APPENDIX A: Attendance for Sparse Rural Sub Sig Meeting

30th January 2017

Name	Organisation
CLlr Cecilia Motley	RSN Chair
Graham Biggs	RSN
David Inman	RSN
Andy Dean	RSN
CLlr Cameron Clark	Sevenoaks District Council
CLlr David Ireton	Craven District Council
William Jacobs	South Oxfordshire District Council
CLlr Janet Duncton	West Sussex County Council
CLlr Owen Bierley	West Lindsey District Council
CLlr Peter Stevens	St Edmundsbury Borough Council
Ian Knowles, Director of Resources	West Lindsey District Council
CLlr Roger Phillips	Herefordshire Council
CLlr Sue Sanderson	Cumbria County Council
CLlr Glynn Gilfoyle	Nottinghamshire County Council
CLlr Jeremy Savage	South Norfolk District Council
CLlr Peter Thornton	South Lakeland District Council
Paul Over	Chichester District Council
Malcolm Leeding	NALC
Dan Bates	Pixel

APPENDIX B: Apologies for Sparse Rural Sub Sig Meeting (30th January 2017)

Name	Organisation
Cllr Adam Paynter	Cornwall Council
Cllr Bob Adams	South Kesteven District Council
Revd Richard Kirlew	Sherborne Deanery Rural Chaplaincy
John Birtwistle	First Group
Cllr Blake Pain	Harborough District Council
Cllr Jane March	Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Dominic Bradley	Horsham District Council
Cllr Yvonne Peacock	Richmondshire District Council
Cllr Ian Threlfall	Richmondshire District Council
Cllr Louise Gittins	Cheshire West & Chester Council
Cllr Gwilym Butler	Shropshire Council
Sophie Hosking	West Devon Borough Council & South Hams District Council
Steve Jordan	West Devon Borough Council & South Hams District Council
Cllr Richard Sherras	Ribble Valley Borough Council
Terry Collins	Durham County Council
Cllr Elizabeth Sneath	South Holland District Council
Cllr Heather Bainbridge	Mid Devon District Council
Cllr Brian Robinson	Forest of Dean District Council
Cllr Leigh Higgins	Melton Borough Council
Duncan Ellis	North Norfolk District Council
Cllr Simon Edwards	South Cambridgeshire District Council
Kerry Booth	RSN
Cllr Aaron Spencer	Boston Borough Council
Cllr Gonzalez De Savage	Northamptonshire County Council
Nicky Lovely	Newark & Sherwood District Council
Cllr Edward Baines	Rutland County Council
Mr Jack Hegarty	Malvern Hills District Council & Wychavon District Council
Cllr Peter Bedford	Boston Borough Council
Cllr David Godfrey	Shepway District Council
Cllr Michael Hicks	South Hams District Council
Rachel North	West Sussex County Council
Cllr Lindsey Cawrey	North Kesteven District Council
Cllr Derrick Haley	Mid Suffolk District Council
Stewart Horne	Business Information Point
Angela George	Stroud Council
David Stanley	Stroud Council
Cllr Margaret Squires	Mid Devon District Council
Cllr Samantha Dixon	Cheshire West & Chester Council
Cllr Lewis Strange	Lincolnshire County Council
Cllr Jane Mortimer	Scarborough Borough Council
Gillian Keegan	Chichester District Council
Cllr Gordon Nicholson	Eden District Council