

Delivering the Services that matter in Rural England
RSN Seminar – 13 September 2011
Breakout Sessions

Regional Networking

Is the region to all intents and purposes defunct as an administrative concept?

- Central Government recognises the need for something between the national and local = 'subnational areas'.
- Blurring of administrative boundaries & fluidity.
- The region is dead. Long live the region.
- Regional functions and LEAs – coordination is important. LEAs have porous borders.
- Emergency services still operate at a regional level, now renamed to 'sub national'.
- Concept of regional Government is gone – although there are still some bits of Govt at the regional level e.g. BIS Local.
- We all still use regional concepts in our daily vocabulary.

What would it be most useful to build regional networking around?

- Europe/Brussels
- Back office functions (e.g. HR, finance).
- Crime (e.g. fraud, transport).
- Churches Regional Commissions.
- Tourism.
- East Midlands Universities Network.
- Fire and Ambulance services.
- What is the relationship between administrative boundaries and functionality?
- Where savings can be made (e.g. training).
- Where you can come together to solve a problem.
- Desperation is bringing people together.
- Some merit in rural networking – no clear agenda around the replacement of the Rural Affairs Forums – a messy and potentially unhelpful alternative on a "pick and mix" basis is emerging

What are the advantages and disadvantages of regional networking?

Advantages

- Collaboration and partnership working.
- Finance and funding opportunities.
- Working together –inter trading.
- Spread best practice.
- Economies of scale – you are more likely to innovate if you are a larger organisation and/or aspirational.
- Not duplicating effort.
- Bottom up, porous boundaries (unlike regional structure and putting lines on a map).

Disadvantages

- Different local authorities have different priorities.
- Having to compromise on what you want for your area.
- Communication.

- Only successful bodies will work together.

Other points

- If I have an idea who can I work with? Lincolnshire, for example, working with other coastal authorities (Norfolk, Cambridgeshire).
- Different kinds of regional networking are needed for different areas and themes.
- Central Government is putting money where it thinks it is needed.
- What will be the new priorities in any regional work?
- Will there be training for people to work in new structures?

In 3 year's time where will the 'region' be?

- Even more short of cash.
- Potentially coming back into fashion (as with the cyclical nature of all things)?
- "Clusters" of services.
- In danger of everything being more centralised.
- What is the overarching strategy?
- More volunteers will be needed.
- LEPs and project management – are LEPs too silo based? Are LEPs facilitating strategic alliances with local economies?
- Measuring function not structure (e.g. roads by network and condition not by county or region).
- More advisory bodies and facilitators?
- Local authorities needing to support communities (e.g. employing community development workers).

How can public service providers work with rural estates?

- Lincolnshire County Council & county farm estates – the county council directs the land agent. Estates provide infrastructure (e.g. jobs, premises, workspaces).
- Estates & local authorities have to balance making money/hitting targets and being able to reinvest (i.e., estates amalgamate holdings and selling surplus dwellings).
- Councils are not being innovative or strategic enough = make land agents work harder, actively buy land.
- How to attract new tenants not new tenants related to existing tenants. No waiting list for tenants!
- What kinds of farming are done (e.g. Lincolnshire-arable, Cheshire – dairy).
- Collaborate on tourism, economic development and events.
- Provision of community facilities.
- Impact of the new planning framework? What about abandoned buildings? Planning conditions attached to usage and the application process.
- Does the estate farm the land or the tenants?
- Are landowners the last rogues? Can we wrestle more land out of private ownership?
- Church as land agents.
- It can be difficult to contact/correspond with land owners. How you build trust, enter into a conversation with them etc.
- You pay back land over the long term – the overall model for the estate is more long term and potentially more sustainable than newer commercial models of financial operation.
- Food security.
- The social housing role of estates is very important and more work needs to be done to understand and interact with this aspect of their role.

James Derounian – Big Society - Big Deal or Big Deal

- Parishes are on the knife edge – they are in the spotlight because of the big society but they also have the capacity to fail due to the pressures to deliver it may put on them
- Are Parish and Town Councils always sufficiently robust and democratic in their structure with co-opting and wide lack of interest in representation to take on more services?
- Where Parishes do take over the provision of services is there an issue of “double taxation” if higher tier authorities don’t reduce the council tax?
- Are most of the provisions within the localism bill about substance or emphasis? It seems that many of the things now being proposed were possible before under old legislation but just not pushed to the same degree perhaps?
- There are already significant examples of Town and Parish Councils getting on with the delivery of services – see the additional reading list for examples offered by James
- Will the Government’s structural approach through the designation of 5000 Community Volunteers – 500 paid for 1 year really drive a difference in community capacity to enable the Big Society to “take root”?
- Can services be transferred and people successfully engaged in delivering them without significant up-front cash and support.
- Is there a danger where transferred services “fail” that the transferring Council is just handing on the blame to the smaller council? How can this be avoided??
- There is scope for Parishes and Town Councils to do more through using their precepting powers but there is a limited tradition of this and at even modest levels of increase it can be locally very controversial.

Tony McArdle – The Potential of Community Budgets

- Community budgets are the evolution of the former place based budgeting approach and the title can to a degree therefore be somewhat misleading
- They are about creating effectively at the local level a public service board approach to pooling budgets across the locality concerned to really deliver a holistic approach to services around people’s local sense of responsibilities.
- Concerns that governance would be complex and there may be too many “off limits” areas of service provision around issues such as health to make the process successful.
- Concerns that geographies would need to be thought through carefully because some places outside of traditional county boundaries depend on county based service providers. For example in the East Midlands the relations between Newark (Notts) and Lincoln are important – in terms of transport, Health and FE for example.
- How would devolution work in this agenda is there actually scope for Parish and Town Councils and even local communities to get engaged in delivering services under an agenda of this scale?
- Government has supported 14 thematic pilots around families with complex issues – but the focus is now switching to looking for 4 more substantive pilot areas where budgets would be joined up more significantly.
- If this process was really supported and invested in by Government and could be made to work on the ground it would represent the most significant shift of power since the modern framework of Government came into being in the 19th and 20th Century.
- Some cynicism that central Government is too concentrated and controlling in its relationship with localities to really let this level of local decision making take place.

Regional Discussion

- Recognition of the contribution of the RSN to raising the “rural voice” of its members
- A view that it is the “last organisation standing” in the context of its focus on rural issues for Public service providers
- A view that the web-site and email digests are really valuable to members particularly.
- Key themes for RSN to look at raised by delegates: Fuel Poverty and Food Inflation, potential implications of changes to the Business Rate arrangements
- Significant interest in the publication of the next “State of the Rural Services” report
- APPG issues which could be raised – focus on really understanding the pros and cons of renewable in terms of rural places, James Derounian idea of a 1 year “Green Deal” year out for Young People.