

ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO THE 2012 RSN MEMBERSHIP SURVEY

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A/ Introduction

A short survey form was circulated to all those with e-mail addresses on Rural Services Network (RSN) membership lists to gather their views about existing RSN services and future service development. It was an online survey which made use of Survey Monkey software. The survey form was designed by and the results analysed by Brian Wilson Associates for the RSN. Richard Inman of the RSN loaded the questions onto the software and distributed the survey. Its circulation took place at the end of June 2012 and it ran for around two and a half weeks.

By 16th July 387 responses had been received. The sector breakdown of these was:

- Local (parish and town) councils: 196 responses or 51% of the total. This sector therefore carries considerable weight in the overall survey results;
- Principal authorities: 107 responses or 28% of the total. This further disaggregates into 35 County or Unitary authorities and 72 District or Borough authorities;
- Voluntary and charitable sector: 38 responses or 10% of the total. This further disaggregates into 29 local organisations and 9 national organisations;
- Private sector: 12 responses or 3% of the total. This further disaggregates into 8 service providers and 4 other commercial organisations.

The remaining responses included 8 from interest groups and 3 from other types of statutory service provider. A few respondents did not state which sector they came from.

In the tables below, as well as showing overall survey results there are results shown for each of the four main sub-groups, namely: local councils; principal authorities; voluntary and charitable organisations; and the private sector. It should, however, be noted that the fairly small number of responses received from the last two of these sub-groups (and especially from the private sector) mean results for them are less robust and percentages shown are more susceptible to wide fluctuation.

Key findings are highlighted, but this paper does not include specific recommendations. Rather this paper will be discussed with the RSN to identify appropriate actions.

B/ Policy topics of interest

RSN members were asked which out of 18 listed policy topics were of particular interest to them. An 'other' box was also provided, if people wanted to name other topics. The table below shows the results from this question. Policy topics are listed in rank order, according

to the overall response to the survey. Rank positions are also given (in brackets) for the sub-groups, so that variation between them can more readily be understood.

Question: Which of these policy topics are of particular interest to you?

Table shows percentages and (in brackets) rank among the eighteen topics listed

	All replies	Principal authorities	Local councils	Voluntary/ charity sector	Private sector
Community action	63% (1)	62% (3)	61% (4)	78% (1)	58% (3=)
Transport	63% (2)	53% (6)	74% (1)	62% (3=)	25% (12=)
Land use planning	62% (3)	52% (7)	69% (2)	46% (13)	75% (2)
Broadband + mobile telephony	60% (4)	58% (5)	68% (3)	51% (8=)	33% (7=)
Funding for services	55% (5)	60% (4)	51% (7)	59% (6)	50% (5)
Environmental services	53% (6)	50% (8)	55% (5)	51% (8=)	33% (7=)
Economic development	52% (7)	71% (1)	34% (13)	62% (3=)	100% (1)
Older people's services	50% (8)	43% (10=)	53% (6)	62% (3=)	33% (7=)
Housing	50% (9)	63% (2)	42% (8)	49% (11=)	42% (6)
Community assets	43% (10)	49% (9)	34% (14)	65% (2)	58% (3=)
Children + young people's services	39% (11)	36% (13)	40% (10)	54% (7)	17% (15=)
Post offices	37% (12)	39% (12)	36% (11)	41% (14)	17% (15=)
Healthcare	36% (13)	35% (14)	35% (12)	51% (8=)	25% (12=)
Libraries + cultural services	34% (14)	30% (16)	41% (9)	27% (17=)	17% (15=)
Tackling disadvantage	31% (15)	43% (10=)	20% (16)	49% (11=)	33% (7=)
Education	29% (16)	25% (17)	30% (15)	27% (17=)	33% (7=)
Welfare reform	24% (17)	31% (15)	17% (17)	30% (16)	17% (15=)
Other retail (not POs)	20% (18)	23% (18)	13% (18)	35% (15)	25% (12=)

Key findings are:

- Community action is the most popular topic overall, just beating transport (2nd), land use planning (3rd) and broadband/mobile telephony (4th). Community action is no doubt felt to be very topical at the moment;
- However, there is considerable variation between the sub-groups. Economic development was the most popular topic for both principal authorities and the private sector;

- The three lowest scoring topics were education, welfare reform and other retail (not Post Offices).

A few 'other' topics (not among the 18 listed) were suggested by respondents, including agriculture and local food production, renewables and green issues, fuel poverty, heritage, crime, rural skills, rural enterprise, rural isolation, traffic calming and support for the voluntary sector.

C/ Existing RSN services

RSN members were asked to rate 12 existing services provided by the organisation as very useful, quite useful, not useful or don't know. Results are shown in two tables. The first shows only those who ticked the 'very useful' box. The second shows those who either ticked the 'very useful' or the 'quite useful' boxes. These can be considered as narrow and broad definitions of support for the services respectively.

The table immediately below uses the narrow definition. Again, RSN services are listed in rank order according to the overall survey response.

Question: How do you rate these existing services? – scored them as VERY USEFUL
Table shows percentage and (in brackets) rank among the twelve services listed

	All replies	Principal authorities	Local councils	Voluntary/ charity sector	Private sector
Weekly digest	37% (1)	42% (1)	25% (1)	56% (1)	75% (1)
LA performance profiles	24% (2)	38% (2)	15% (3)	29% (6)	25% (10=)
Defra and RC work	23% (3)	24% (5)	18% (2)	36% (4)	33% (6=)
LA financial reports	22% (4)	35% (3)	12% (7)	31% (5)	25% (10=)
Website articles	20% (5)	16% (9)	14% (4)	44% (2)	42% (4=)
Annual SORS report	19% (6)	22% (6)	12% (6)	28% (7)	58% (3)
Hinterland	18% (7)	33% (4)	3% (12)	38% (3)	42% (4=)
APPG and MPs work	17% (8)	19% (8)	13% (5)	17% (11)	25% (10=)
Fair funding campaign	16% (9)	20% (7)	10% (8)	22% (10)	33% (6=)
Opportunities bulletin	16% (10)	16% (10)	9% (9)	24% (8)	67% (2)
Survey/CfE reports	14% (11)	13% (12)	9% (10)	24% (9)	33% (6=)
Regional seminars	9% (12)	13% (11)	5% (11)	11% (12)	33% (6=)

Key findings are:

- The Weekly Digest is easily the most highly rated of the existing services. Indeed, this holds true for all four sub-groups;

- Other popular services overall are local authority performance profiles (2nd), RSN work with Defra and the Rural Coalition (3rd), local authority financial reports (4th) and website articles (5th);
- The two largest sub-groups – local councils and principal authorities – gave similar responses. The other two gave some rather different responses, such as voluntary/charitable sector support for Hinterland and private sector support for the Opportunities Bulletin and State of Rural Services report;
- It is, perhaps, surprising that the fair funding campaign does not rank higher, especially with principal authorities.

It may be that some of these services rank high or low because they are well known or not-so-well known. Some services are more visible than others. This may explain why there were a few services where over a third of respondents ticked the 'don't know' box e.g. regional seminars, the fair funding campaign and RSN work with APPG/MPs. RSN may wish to promote such services further.

The next table uses the broader definition of support for existing RSN services.

Question: How do you rate these existing services? – scored them as EITHER VERY OR FAIRLY USEFUL

Table shows percentage and (in brackets) rank among the twelve services listed

	All replies	Principal authorities	Local councils	Voluntary/charity sector	Private sector
Weekly digest	86% (1)	92% (1)	82% (1)	94% (1)	100% (1)
Website articles	64% (2)	69% (4)	56% (2)	81% (2)	83% (2=)
Annual SORS report	57% (3)	67% (5=)	49% (4)	64% (6)	83% (2=)
Hinterland	57% (4)	77% (2)	38% (11)	65% (5)	75% (5=)
Defra and RC work	57% (5)	60% (10)	52% (3)	67% (4)	67% (7=)
Survey/CfE reports	56% (6)	67% (7)	45% (9)	69% (3)	83% (2=)
LA performance profiles	55% (7)	71% (3)	48% (6)	54% (8)	58% (9)
LA financial reports	54% (8)	67% (5=)	49% (5)	51% (9)	50% (10=)
Opportunities bulletin	52% (9)	57% (11)	46% (7)	62% (7)	75% (5=)
APPG and MPs work	51% (10)	62% (9)	45% (8)	50% (10=)	50% (10=)
Fair funding campaign	51% (11)	63% (8)	44% (10)	50% (10=)	67% (7=)
Regional seminars	38% (12)	50% (12)	30% (12)	39% (12)	50% (10=)

Key findings are:

- Similar to those based on the narrow definition. The Weekly Digest remains much the most popular service;

- Though website articles (2nd), State of Rural Services reports (3rd) and Hinterland (4th) rise higher up the rankings on this definition;
- There are some notable variations between sub-groups, such as RSN work with Defra and the Rural Coalition being very popular with local councils and voluntary/charitable organisations but less supported by principal authorities;
- Finally, it should be noted that a majority of RSN members found virtually all of its existing services useful.

D/ Developing new services

RSN members were asked which out of 8 new services they would find useful in future. These are all services which RSN has been developing or considering over recent months. An 'other' box was provided, in case people wanted to mention other services which could be developed. Again, respondents to this question were asked to tick very useful, quite useful, not useful or don't know.

The table below uses the narrow definition of support for these services.

Question: Which of these services would you find useful in future? – scored them as VERY USEFUL

Table shows percentages and (in brackets) rank among the eight services suggested

	All replies	Principal authorities	Local councils	Voluntary/charity sector	Private sector
Best practice case studies	34% (1)	38% (1)	25% (1)	61% (1)	50% (1=)
More replies to Gov't consultations	24% (2=)	25% (2)	19% (4)	31% (2)	33% (4=)
Expert policy advice	24% (2=)	25% (3)	24% (2)	21%(6=)	33% (4=)
Locum service	18% (4)	13% (7)	21% (3)	22% (5)	25% (6)
Online discussion forums	18% (5)	15% (6)	15% (5)	19% (8)	36% (3)
More private sector input	17% (6)	15% (5)	9% (6)	28% (3)	50% (1=)
Academic input/articles	13% (7)	20% (4)	5% (8)	21% (6=)	8% (7)
Learning from beyond England	12% (8)	11% (8)	8% (7)	26% (4)	0% (8)

Key findings are:

- By some margin the most popular of the new services listed was best practice case studies. This was the most popular with all four sub-groups;
- There is also considerable support for RSN responding to more Government policy consultations and for offering a policy advice service;

- New services with less support would be learning from beyond England and more academic articles/input, though there are some varied views about these from sub-groups.

The next table uses the broader definition of support for these new services.

Question: Which of these services would you find useful in future? – scored them as EITHER VERY OR FAIRLY USEFUL

Table shows percentages and (in brackets) rank among the eight services suggested

	All replies	Principal authorities	Local councils	Voluntary/charity sector	Private sector
Best practice case studies	89% (1)	84% (2)	74% (2)	92% (1)	92% (2=)
More replies to Gov't consultations	76% (2)	86% (1)	70% (3)	81% (2)	67% (5)
Expert policy advice	74% (3)	73% (4)	77% (1)	71% (6)	58% (7=)
Online discussion forums	66% (4)	71% (5)	63% (5)	56% (8)	100% (1)
More private sector input	66% (5)	77% (3)	52% (6)	78% (4)	92% (2=)
Locum service	61% (6)	50% (8)	69% (4)	61% (7)	58% (7=)
Academic input/articles	53% (7)	60% (6)	39% (7)	79% (3)	75% (4)
Learning from beyond England	51% (8)	60% (7)	35% (8)	74% (5)	64% (6)

Key findings are:

- The results are more varied using this broader definition. Best practice case studies remains the most popular new service overall;
- However, each of the sub-groups has a different most popular service. Principal authorities have a particular preference for RSN responses to Government consultations and local councils would most like expert policy advice¹;
- The overall rankings are similar using the narrow and broader definitions of support. On the broader definition there is somewhat more support for discussion forums and private sector input.

Other new services which were requested (aside from those listed on the survey form) were:

- Collection of comparative information from individual local authorities e.g. CIL rates;
- Ongoing or updated information about good practice projects and their progress;
- An ability for members to feed in to the RSN's policy development work;
- Funding advice specifically for cultural projects;
- Advice or assistance specifically with affordable housing projects;

¹ It is not at all clear that RSN could provide expert advice to this sector, given its resources and that local councils are not paying members. It may beg the question, though, whether RSN could bid for grants to provide such advice.

- A rural assessment of the 2008 Planning Act with respect to major infrastructure projects.

At least the first three of these seem worthwhile of further consideration.

E/ What members want from the RSN

Finally, RSN members were asked whether they agreed with certain statements about what they wanted from the organisation. They could agree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, or tick don't know. Four statements were given on the survey form.

Question: Respondents agreeing with these statements about what they want from the RSN

Table shows percentages and (in brackets) rank among the four statements given

I want the RSN to help me	All replies	Principal authorities	Local councils	Voluntary/ charity sector	Private sector
Keep up to date with rural news and policy	90% (1)	90% (1)	88 (1)	95% (1=)	100% (1)
Identify good ideas for policy and practice	87% (2)	89% (2)	84% (2)	95% (1=)	92% (2)
Input to rural lobbying with Govt and Depts	71% (3)	75% (3)	66% (3)	84% (3)	67% (3)
Network with rural practitioners from other bodies	52% (4)	46% (4)	50% (4)	58% (4)	58% (4)

Key findings are:

- Members most want RSN to help them keep up to date with rural news and policy. This is true for all sub-groups and confirms the popularity of the Weekly Digest;
- Identifying good ideas for policy and practice scores almost as highly as something being sought from the RSN (and across all sub-groups);
- Networking opportunities is the least popular thing being sought from RSN, though a good half of respondents still agree this is something they want.

There was an 'other' box with this questions which collected just a few comments. Other things mentioned as wants from RSN were: a sounding board to collate its members' views; and a place to find profiles of rural business ventures.

F/ Further comments provided

A final box was provided where respondents could add any further comments they wished to. These were inevitably a mix of different types of comment about the RSN and its services. However, most are covered by the paragraphs below, especially those comments made by more than one person.

It is worth highlighting that quite a few praised the services provided by the RSN – either in general terms or specific services. Some quotes are.

“The RSN’s role keeping rural affairs in the minds of policy practitioners is vital.”

“An excellent service and always up to date.”

“I often disagree, but I would not be without it.”

“Thank you for the services.”

“I find the short summaries of what is important for rural areas very useful.”

“You’re doing a very good job.”

“Please keep producing Hinterland, it’s very informative.”

“Your web pages and e-mails have enabled me to link my officers to new grants, good practice and factual statements. Thank you.”

Two members made particular reference to the upcoming closure of the CRC and felt that the RSN should be more of a watchdog, highlighting issues of concern to rural communities.

Three members commented that they received too many e-mails/communications from RSN and/or that the e-mails were too long. One specifically asked that the Weekly Digest does not repeat articles from previous weeks.

One member considered that contributors to RSN communications are expressing too many views (indeed, showing “increasing political bias”). They should stick to reporting the facts or be upfront about their agenda.

Another asked for an index to be provided at the end of each year, so members can easily go back to that year’s news items, articles, etc on a particular topic. They don’t feel that the current website search facility works well.

One member felt that the RSN is still “broadcasting” in an era of social media. It should allow members to post their views and to input.

Two members said that the RSN should not forget that it has members outside the local authority sector. One of them went on to ask for more material relevant to rural businesses.

This can be linked to a comment from someone who asked how the business perspective could be better fed in to RSN and rural policy debate.

Finally, there were two similar comments requesting the provision of additional analysis:

- One would like to see more comparative trend data for local authorities, with a brief analytical overview; and
- The other would like to see comparative performance statistics based on the former National Indicators. They recognise these are no longer utilised by central Government, but feel they offer useful benchmarks.