

Meeting of the UK Rural Policy & Practitioners Group, Friday 22nd February 2013 at the Countryside Alliance offices, 367, Kennington Road, London.

Present:- Brian Wilson (RSN) Convenor and Chair, Jane Atterton (Scotland's Rural College) Convenor, Paul Milbourne (Cardiff University) Convenor, Sarah Lee (Countryside Alliance), David Collier (NFU), Jon Carling (CRC), Greg Lewis (Age UK), David Inman (RSN)

Apologies:- Ulrika Diallo (FSB), Richard Kirlew (Church in Wales), Chris Wade (AMT), Jill Hopkinson (ARC), Peter Couchman (Plunkett Foundation), Martyn Evans (Carnegie UK), Rupert Ashby (CLA), Fiona Williams (IRH)

1. Welcome and introductions

Brian Wilson thanked the Countryside Alliance for hosting this meeting and particularly welcomed Professor Paul Milbourne who had agreed to act as the Group's convenor in Wales.

2. Recruitment of country conveners

The Group were now seeking a fourth convenor for Northern Ireland. Brian had contacted Dr Sally Shortall at Queen's University Belfast to see if she might be interested. She in turn had recommended Dr Ruth McAreavey. The group were happy for Ruth to be formally approached.

3. Development of the UK RPPG network

(i) Website development

It was felt important that the group had its own website presence. As their own website was being redeveloped Jane Atterton offered the Scotland's Rural College website as a host site, with other members being able to link that to their sites. They would be pleased to undertake the necessary set up work and to keep the site updated. The web presence could be used to promote and make accessible recent research by Group members.

(ii) Membership

There were undoubtedly other organisations out there who may be interested in becoming members of the UK RPPG. It was agreed that existing Group members should be asked which others could be put on a list, who would then be invited to join.

(iii) Link with the Rural Coalition

The Rural Coalition was a grouping of some of the major rural organisations, initially put together by CRC and Defra. It was often used by Government as a sounding board and had proved useful. Its remit was solely about England and it often concentrated on current 'parliamentary' issues. Some organisations appreciated the distinct roles and approaches of

it and the UK RPPG, and were active members of both groups. It was agreed that some concordat between the two groups would seem helpful, setting out their respective remits and where they might work together. The Chair of the Rural Coalition would be approached.

(iv) Frequency and venue for meetings

It was felt the group should aim for two face-to-face meetings a year and it was hoped each meeting would seek to have a couple of presentations. To reflect the group was UK based it was hoped that one meeting could be in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, with the other meeting being held in London. It was hoped this could be supplemented by some virtual contact or sessions (IRH had written suggesting this would be helpful). This concept would be thought through and considered at a future meeting.

(v) Networking

The RSN as a whole would shortly be looking at how improved networking services could be introduced throughout their operation. Kerry Booth who would look at this area started with RSN on 11th March. It was hoped, in due course, this might give opportunities for the UK RPPG.

4. Short updates on recent/ongoing work from UK RPPG members

Age UK- Had been looking at the impact of cuts in bus services on the lives of older people. A report and video are expected to be released in mid March.

NFU- Are undertaking some work on what farming delivers in upland areas. Also have some work from a consumer survey which is due for imminent publication.

Countryside Alliance- Had been undertaking work on consumer attitudes to meat labelling and country of origin. Results should be published in April.

SRUC- Had recently published a briefing note on housing in rural Scotland. There is ongoing research on rural poverty/social exclusion and on CAP and land reform.

CRC- Plan to conclude their work with a piece which will set out the main upcoming policy issues for rural communities.

RSN- Detailed their parliamentary work in relation to the Local Government Settlement for 2013/14. Whilst an increased sparsity contribution had been agreed and entered into the settlement other settlement changes had effectively removed all of the 'gain' and the impact of the other introduced factors was so great that rural funding had actually fallen back in comparison with urban when examined in cash allocation percentage terms. The matter had been pursued very actively with Ministers and MPs and the government had at the last minute introduced a special one year grant (ESSSA) outside the settlement which helped some authorities a little and agreed to further discussions during 2013.

5. Older people in rural areas and poverty – presentation and discussion (Professor Paul Milbourne, Cardiff University)

Paul gave a fascinating and powerful presentation on work which Cardiff University had commissioned over a number of locations in both England and Wales.

Amongst other things this highlighted the low expectations of many older people in rural communities, especially those who had always lived there, with poverty becoming 'normalised'. Low incomes could have a knock-on impact on isolation and access to key services. Poverty was particularly associated with the very elderly and older people living alone. Rising living costs for food and fuel were now a key issue.

The power point presentation used is attached to these minutes.

6. Rural micro-businesses in a challenging economic environment – presentation and discussion (Jon Carling, Commission for Rural Communities)

The Commission formally closes at the end of March 2013. They had been running at a much reduced staffing level for over 2 years, but had still managed to produce a series of reports over this period covering various topics. These would be available on RSN Online, as well as being archived. A link to archived material would be available from RSN Online.

Jon gave an interesting presentation with many examples from their study of a selection of micro businesses over the past year. Success factors included business diversity, selling in niche markets, capitalising on the rural environment, working in networks/partnerships and the acumen of the owner/manager. Key rural constraints were lack of broadband, planning restrictions, access to credit and few opportunities for business support. The Group wondered if organisations like the FSB might help promote messages about planning changes heralded by the NPPF.

The power point presentation used is attached to these minutes.

7. AOB and date for next meeting

The next meeting would take place in September (date to be set). Jane Atterton offered Edinburgh as a possible venue.