

**Meeting of the UK Rural Policy & Practitioners Group**  
**5<sup>th</sup> September 2012**

**Present:**

Brian Wilson (RSN) (Chair), Jane Atterton (Scottish Agricultural College), David Collier (NFU), Ulrika Diallo (FSB), Richard Kirlew (Church in Wales), Adam Lavis (CRC), Greg Lewis (Age UK), Chris Wade (AMT), Dan Bates (RSN), David Inman (RSN)

**Apologies for Absence:**

Jill Hopkinson (ARC), Peter Couchman (Plunkett), Rupert Ashby (CLA), Graham Biggs (RSN)

**(1) Welcome and Introduction and the Role and Operation of the Group**

Brian Wilson presented apologies from Graham Biggs who was unwell and unable to attend.

Brian introduced the work of the Group to date and the views and aspirations expressed by members previously. The Group sought to examine best practice and rural experience across the UK where differing Governmental rural regimes operate. It did not seek to be representational in nature or a lobby group. A note on the position established had been circulated. David Inman added that while the RSN was prepared to introduce some assistance the speed of development of the Group might, to an extent, be determined by the success or otherwise of grant applications.

From the structural perspective it was hoped the Group could at some point achieve:

- a dedicated website or area of the RSN website;
- a statistical base allowing some comparison on the statistical position across the Home Countries; and
- an Executive of a representative from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Country Convenors).

The RSN and SAC were prepared to take on that role in respect of England and Scotland respectively.

The Group discussed who may be approached to take on the role in Wales and Northern Ireland. It was decided that discussion should initially take place with Paul Milbourne at the University of Cardiff (rather than in his post at the Wales Rural Observatory, which is Government funded) and with Sally Shortall at Queens University, Belfast. The position in relation to the Board of the Rural Welsh Showground and Aberystwyth University may also be considered.

At the present time the Group had liaison with 100 rural English organisations through the RSN Network. It would be good to incorporate Welsh, Scotch and Northern Irish authorities in some way should they be interested. Thought would be given as to how this could be done.

Once the Executive was established the Group would give consideration to:-

- a. Common Topics of Interest
- b. Reporting Mechanisms

## **(2) Two Minute Commentaries – Rural Policy Progress**

### **Age UK**

They were currently doing some scoping work on rural transport. They expected to do a report next February.

Many of their member groups were extremely concerned about the fact that the rural dimension failed to be considered.

### **AMT**

Were very much involved with sister groups in Wales (CREW) and Scotland (Scotland's Town Partnership) looking at national benchmarking and methodology relating to the presentation of Town ED statistics and allowing comparisons and identification of best practice.

Working with a University they were working as the research group entitled "Small Towns for Tomorrow"

### **NFU**

They were preparing a report on the impact of the internet. Whilst 90% of farms used computers only two thirds would be on broadband. Mobile broadband connectivity was of significant interest.

They were engaged in a document establishing agricultural facts and figures.

Agricultural crime was a really big concern. Many farmers felt reporting thefts was futile so published figures were actually an understatement.

### **SAC**

They offered papers on work undertaken re a rural parliament in Scotland which seemed to have political support.

Other work included that related to CAP reform and to a Land Reform Review Group.

### **CRC**

They were on Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> September to issue a paper on older people and social isolation. It would reveal statistics outlining how poorly rural areas could be treated in comparison to the position in urban localities.

They were doing work on micro businesses during recession which would involve case studies.

They were planning a workshop concerning how various LEPS were looking at rural issues and the variances involved.

## **FSB**

They were giving greater consideration to rural issues as the majority of their 200,000 members were from micro business in rural areas. They worked in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

They had a Committee now established on rural issues and their statistics now facilitated a breakdown providing the identification of rural considerations and dimensions. They were keen to contribute into rural advocacy.

They were already working with the RSN in a number of areas.

There was serious concern about rural broadband where it was felt the position reached was 'inexcusable'.

## **CIW**

The position in Wales was detailed. It was felt rural consideration had lost a lot of ground and fierce representation had been made by 37 groups.

Rural Policy was considered to have recently been lightweight.

It was hoped the Welsh Government Assembly would revisit the issue.

## **RSN**

RSN described the financial campaign they were currently very heavily engaged in . The reaction to date of DCLG was outlined. There was optimism that the additional cost of rural service provision might be better identified but the benefit was likely to be heavily damped back by some 75%. Nevertheless the recognition of the principle was important for all rural service deliverers.

### **(3) Rural Scotland in Focus 2012 Report - presentation by Dr Jane Atterton (SAC) and discussion.**

Jane gave the context for the 2012 report and presented the thinking behind the various chapters contained in the recently published report. A key finding was the extent of variation within rural Scotland and its small towns, not least in terms of economic performance.

Members were particularly impressed by the way the report combined statistical data and observation providing a really useful overview. The report had drawn Scottish Government interest.

**(4) England's Experience To-Date with Statutory Neighbourhood Planning - presentation by Brian Wilson (RSN) and discussion.**

Brian presented a paper on reaction in relation to neighbourhood planning. It followed a RSN survey, where there had been a useful feedback from local authorities and community members, and Brian's practical support for some local councils involved.

The picture was clearly mixed but there appeared to be significant interest from parish and town councils who felt they may consider involvement. The early indications were that parishes in the south were likely to be keener than their northern counterparts.

A useful discussion followed where the consensus was one of support for the initiative undertaken by the Government here. It may be useful to repeat such a survey at a later date.

**(5) Next Meeting.**

The next meeting was arranged for 15<sup>th</sup> of January 2013. It would again be in London.