

Meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group, 3rd April 2014, 2.00pm, Dining Room C, House of Commons, London

Present:

Graham Stuart MP
Anne McIntosh MP
Baroness Byford
Marion Collishaw, the office of Robert Walter MP
Oliver Ward for Therese Coffey MP
Pippa Page, Researcher for Sir Nick Harvey MP
Bill Wiggin MP
Eric Ollerenshaw MP
Lord Cameron of Dillington
Nick Falsey, Researcher for Graham Stuart MP
Jon Carroll, Researcher for Graham Stuart MP
Audrey Roy (DEFRA)
Graham Biggs (RSN)
David Inman (RSN)

1. The notes of the previous meeting were approved

2. Presentation

Anne McIntosh, EFRA Select Committee Chair, detailed her reaction to the current situation. She felt rural areas were receiving an increasingly bad deal. This was the first time the EFRA Committee had done a comprehensive report on their findings and her Committee were disappointed by the Government response. She felt government had failed to react to the obviously higher costs of rural service. These costs were clearly indisputable.

Her Committee were disappointed no discretionary pupil premium had filtered through. This allowed Local Authorities little flexibility for smaller schools.

Progress on broadband in rural areas had been disappointing. The required scheme criteria were proving a deterrent and before moving on to more and more technological improvement there was some imperative to allow a catch up across the nation as a whole.

There was concern that no one was thinking through the contribution rural business funding could provide to the rural economy. There was often an assumption rural industry was farming and food. Surveys would show it was not and rural businesses needed to be incentivised. This placed the situation regarding broadband in a frightening context.

3. Future Select Committee meetings might consider:-

- a. Road per capita in rural areas
- b. The government TB strategy
- c. Fracking

- d. Burning waste to create energy

4. Discussion

a. Broadband

There was a fear that money was not hitting the real targets. It was BT based as they only wanted to move to where there was an existing market and not create one. A member commented on the situation in his Constituency where BT was not interested but the local community created a market and BT then moved in to contain that market from expanding

The Government needed to look at things from other angles giving more priority to some hard to reach areas.

b. Fraking

Most of the shale beds to be investigated were in rural areas. There was a strong feeling that present measures failed to give sufficient incentive therefore people opposition would continue.

The Treasury were being far too cautious.

Local Trust Funds were needed with a significant percentage pay back being levied. The alternative might be percentage of fuel being used locally at a subsidised cost. It was felt there ought to be an enquiry into best community pay back.

It was acknowledged that there was a variant between exploration work and abstraction with different companies being employed but until local people felt sufficiently incentivised by the possible potential things would be difficult.

c. Rural Proofing

Lord Cameron and RCPU detailed how this was progressing. It was felt positive steps were being made and that other government departments were taking note because a government department was involved on this occasion and not an outside agency.

5. Future APPG Meetings

It was hoped the Rural Economy and the way the LEP system was working could be included in the programme plus a session on rural fuel costs which might be linked to the usual transport presentation.

Fair Funding (including pot holes) would continue. Affordable housing (including the effect of the spare room subsidy) was suggested as was the development of community benefit models relating to Fracking

It was anticipated that more attempt would be made to involve one or more sessions with direct discussion with -a Minister each year.

Members also like to idea of establishing a list of “one line – The Rural Realities of ...” and then building documents based on these one liners.