

Rural Services APPG

Notes of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services

Wednesday 27th April 2011, 2:00pm-3:00pm
Committee Room 12 – HoC

In attendance:

Members:

Graham Stuart MP – Chairman

Rural Services Network (RSN) (Secretariat):

Graham Biggs – Chief Executive

David Inman – Director

Wendy Cooper – Administrator

Speakers:

Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service

Nathan Travis, Assistant Chief Fire Officer

Lincolnshire Police

Richard Compton, Chief Constable

**NB This was an inquorate meeting (a quorum is three members one of whom is an Office Holder).
The meeting proceeded as an information exchange.**

Apologies

Peter Aldous MP, Lord Ewen Cameron, Baroness Gibson, Rt Revd Anthony Priddis, Rory Stewart MP, Andrew Tyrie MP, Nadhim Zahawi MP.

1. **Notes of the Meeting – 3rd November 2011**
Agreed.
2. **Welcome and Introduction from the Chairman**
Graham Stuart, Chairman, apologised to the speakers for the low Member turnout.
3. **Service Issues and Funding Formula Concerns relating to non Local Government Rural Services**
 - (i) **Fire and Rescue**
Presentation by Nathan Travis, Assistant Chief Fire Officer – Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service
The presentation concentrated on the Retained Duty System aspects of the Service, extreme events and changing demographics. There were pressures on attracting and retaining people within the retained duty system together with maintaining

skills and training. A number of fire authorities were carrying out employer days, visiting local businesses to explain and encourage their support. Reaction to extreme events (e.g. floods, tidal surges) relied heavily on the retained duty system staff. The service was establishing mutual arrangements with neighbouring authorities and developing an infrastructure for shared specialist services. With respect to demographics it was noted that there was a higher percentage of elderly population in rural areas. It was also noted that for example Cumbria Fire & Rescue Service area was 6 times the size of London which resulted in pressure on response times and fire prevention. The Service was trying to tackle these issues by introducing techniques relevant to the social/economic profile of the area together with targeting resources to difficult to reach areas. Oxfordshire had linked with the County Council action groups, crime reduction partnerships and neighbourhood action groups in this respect.

With respect to recent funding announcements, the Service was facing a 10% to 15% cut in years 3 and 4 back-loaded to protect "front line". 85% of the revenue budget covered salaries. It was noted that, on average, the running of a Retained Duty System fire engine cost around £100,000 per year with a fire engine staffed full time costing around £1,000,000 per year. Rural fire service provision was based around the retained duty system. Whilst efficiencies were being made through "back office functions" this was a small amount compared to the closure of either a full-time or retained duty system station. The Service was working collectively with partners to reduce costs with joint procurement, sharing facilities within wider local authority services and joint working procedures.

Information noted from questions:

The higher fuel costs had not had a significant impact on the rural services as incidents had reduced due to good prevention work so the increased costs were being managed. Although this was dependent on reducing calls and good management, it could be counteracted by spate calls (e.g. floods) or large incidents, for example.

Rural House prices could be a barrier to attracting full time and retained duty system staff.

Many firefighters in rural areas were keen to become co-responders however the Fire Brigades Union was currently opposed to this at a national level. Co-responding is where specially trained firefighters were working on behalf of the Ambulance Trust responding to agreed categories of health-related incidents.

Minimum crew size across Services was commonly seen as between 4 – 5 firefighters, but this had been reduced under certain conditions (e.g. specialist vehicles with high pressure water-fogging equipment where the crew does not enter into a property). Northants FRS were currently using a COBRA high pressure system that allowed for this. They were happy to demonstrate this equipment if needed.

(ii) **Police**

Richard Crompton, Chief Constable - Lincolnshire Police

The national funding settlement had resulted in a cut in grant over the CSR period of 25%, front loaded. The impact, however, was not uniform across all Forces as some are more reliant upon grant than others. Lincolnshire for example was amongst the seven or eight police authorities in the country most dependent upon precept, funding from this source making up approximately 40% of their overall funding, whereas in the West Midlands, for example, council tax precept only accounted for around 18% of the total budget. On the other hand, Lincolnshire Police Authority had argued for many years that the national funding formula disadvantaged them.

Around 80% of the overall police budget is spent on staff and it is anticipated that during the CSR period police officer numbers would reduce by around 10% and civilian support staff by around 20%. All Forces were seeking to make significant efficiencies in order to protect service through, for example, national rather than local procurement, collaboration amongst forces, restructuring, and through a developing emphasis upon outsourcing and strategic partnership with the private sector.

Crime could not be categorised into rural and urban and even urban police authorities had some rural areas. Therefore crime statistics were not categorised in area but by crime type, although some crimes are more prevalent in rural areas, e.g. theft of agricultural machinery, theft of lead, theft of diesel, this has risen recently as this type of crime is linked to the price of the relevant goods. Manufacturers were trying to assist with making goods less easy to steal.

Future emphasis needed to be working more effectively with local communities rather than more "officers on the beat". Lincolnshire, for example, had over 200 special constables and had a waiting list for future induction and training. There was a cost associated with providing special constables, however, in some rural areas they were essential to the provision of effective local policing. Lincolnshire also had PCSOs and it was felt that they were invaluable and were highly regarded in the community. No reductions were planned in the number of PCSOs in Lincolnshire. The County Council was very supportive and currently paid for 60 PCSOs (out of 160). Elsewhere in the country, however, joint funding was reducing with the potential loss in PCSO numbers.

4. Next Meeting

17th May 2011 at 2.00pm, Committee Room 5, HoC to consider Rural Transport.