

Rural Services APPG

Annual General Meeting All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services

Tuesday 26th June 2012, 8.30 – 10.00 am
Breakfast Room 5

In attendance:

Members:

Graham Stuart MP – Chairman
Lord Dear (Vice Chair)
Baroness Byford (Secretary)
Teresa Coffe
Simon Park
Simon Holt
Mark Garnier
Lord Cameron of Dillington

Rural Services Network (RSN) (Secretariat):

Graham Biggs – Chief Executive
David Inman – Director

Speakers:

First Group Buses

John Birtwistle

ACoRP – The Association of Community Rail Partnerships

Neil Buxton, Chris Austin.

Comission for Rural Communities

Jon Carling
Stuart Burgess

Apologies

Anthony Bishop, Nadhim Zahawi, Duke of Montrose, Andrew Tyrie, Grahame Morris, Andrew George, Rory Stewart, Sir Alan Beith

1. Election of Officers:

The following members were re-elected to committee positions:

Chairman: Graham Stuart MP
Vice-Chairmen: Grahame Morris MP
Dan Rogerson MP

Lord Dear QPM
Treasurer: Rory Stewart MP
Secretary: Baroness Byford DBE

There was no change to the current membership.

2. Matters Arising

- (a) Minutes of previous meeting confirmed as an accurate record
- (b) Localisation of Council Tax Support:
Concern was expressed that people of working age on benefit in rural local authority areas might suffer more than those in urban areas as these authorities had a higher percentage of pensioners whose level of benefit had to be protected.
- (c) A note from the Rural Services Network's Finance Director. Rural Health Payments is attached as Appendix A.
Despite an 'improvement' between consultation and the latest figures grant to rural local authorities would still be significantly lower than to their urban counterparts. This appeared yet again to be an understatement of rural need.
- (d) Local Authority Fairer Funding Campaign:
Graham Biggs detailed the position reached. The consultation documentation from DCLG was anticipated before the recess. The support of Rural MP's would be key.

3. Rural Bus Services

John Birtwistle from First Group Buses made a detailed presentation on the threats and challenges facing rural areas. The position was very mixed but there was a clear and continuing threat to services in rural areas. In rural areas because of the economic situation bus usage was declining.

The presentation included points on:

- (a) Local Authority Finances and Policy
 - (b) The OFT Report on Price and Choice in remote communities
 - (c) Legislation
 - (d) Merges and Acquisitions
 - (e) Concessionary Fares
 - (f) Fuel
 - (g) Demand for Services
 - (h) What are operators doing
- (A copy of the power points slides are attached)

4. ACoRP – The Association of Community Rail Partnerships Presentation

Neil Buxton, the General Manager of the Association of Community Rail partnerships, made a presentation about the Partnerships' work. Yet again there was a feeling that rural services needed support at a turbulent time. Coordination of forward thinking would be of assistance.

(A copy of the main points of the presentation is attached as Appendix C).

5. CRC – The Commission for Rural Communities Presentation

The Chairman and Chief Executive of the Commission for Rural Communities commented

across a wide range of areas. Unfortunately the Commission is due to close on the 31st March 2013.

(a) Social Isolation (Jon Carling – Chief Executive)

Two papers have been produced which have now been widely circulated. The need for good practice was emphasised and it was hoped the papers would assist in this regards. A major problem in rural areas clearly arose by bereavement which could be followed for the accompanying partner by a lack of social mobility.

(b) Social Care Expenditure – (Stuart Burgess – Chairman)

A paper by Commissioner Sheena Asthana was outlined. The disparity between payments per head between rural and urban residents was very worrying. In rural areas the average was less than half of the urban figure. What been anecdotal evidence has been verified by real evidence. Funding which was based on deprivation and ignored age needs clearly heavily skewed the position to favour urban areas.

(c) Housing Benefit

There was concern about moves in relation to more unused bedrooms leading to lower benefit. The need for careful consideration in relation to rural areas was emphasised.

(d) Transport and Concessionary Fares

The need for concessionary fares to begin prior to 9:30am was discussed. Some discussion took place about the possibility of personal transport costs budgets in lieu of concessionary fares in certain areas. The shortage of community minibuses as an increasing problem was outlined.

6. Dates of next meeting:

- (a) 15th October 2012 – Small Businesses
- (b) 20th October 2012 – First Response Services