

## RSN RURAL CONFERENCE

3rd/4<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2018

### CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS

Welcome to RSN's 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference. I would like to start by thanking our faithful and generous hosts, the Countryside and Community Research Institute and the University of Gloucestershire, who have made their campus available to us ever since the first Conference in 2015. This has been a most fruitful relationship and we could not be more grateful for their support.

I would also like to thank the Post Office, which is generously supporting the Conference for a second year and Hastoe Housing who are also sponsors this year. Many thanks indeed.

As ever we are delighted to welcome a wide range of delegates this year from a multitude of organisations representing rural interests.

I think we can promise you an interesting – and lively – conference.

We have become accustomed – often uncomfortably – to living with uncertainty and ever-diminishing budgets. This has made life tough, but it has also meant that rural local authorities and businesses alike have had to learn to innovate, to find new ways of delivering vital services and to think smart. This Conference is dedicated to assisting in that process and to demonstrating new and positive ways of working.

For the next two days we would like to put aside – as far as is possible – the turbulence of Westminster politics and focus our discussions on turning challenges into opportunities for our organisations and rural people, businesses and communities. It's useful to start with an overview of our current position:

- With the clock ticking towards our departure from the EU on 31<sup>st</sup> October we still have no clear idea of the shape of our future relationships with Europe.
- Rural areas still need clarity on what replaces the 3 billion euros p.a. which currently flow into supporting agricultural and related industries.
- Local Government continues to suffer the impacts of severe budget pressures. Despite warm words from the new Government about the need - and desire - to boost public services, local government does not appear to be considered an urgent case for support. (No sign of the sunlit uplands...)
- The De-Carbonisation agenda has come right up the agenda. Rural areas are rich in natural and social capital and need support to maximise their potential. They can offer a secure supply of clean renewable energy essential to today's challenged national grid and tomorrow's carbon-free economy.

In terms of some of the challenges – beyond the implications of BREXIT – some of the key ones are:

- ❖ The roll over budget/one year spending review due shortly
- ❖ Continuing delays to the Fair Funding Review, the new Needs Based Formula and local government's retention of 75% of Business Rates
- ❖ The continuing funding imbalance between rural and urban areas which, although recognised, has still not been corrected. RSN will continue to work tirelessly to evidence and promote the rural case.
- ❖ The still unresolved issue of ballooning costs in Adults and Children's Social Care. RSN has consistently highlighted the stark fact that rural service delivery does not fully reflect either the higher numbers of older people in rural areas or the relatively higher costs of service delivery imposed by sparsity and rurality.

Also, more children are being taken into care by local authorities year on year, with commensurate effect on budgets.

- ❖ The situation in both adults and children's social care needs urgent resolution but there is still no sign of the long-awaited Social Care Green Paper
- ❖ To add to these difficulties, the recent Skills for Carers' annual report discloses that some 580,000 jobs in social care will need to be filled by 2035 to keep pace with the increase in the over 65s. Recruitment and retention are a continuing problem in our rural areas, as are perennial difficulties in building affordable housing.
- ❖ RSN has been arguing the case for a rural strategy and were disappointed by the Government's somewhat lukewarm response to the House of Lords Select Committee's excellent and comprehensive report on the Rural Economy, which strongly recommended a national Rural Strategy. We are delighted to be able to welcome Lord Foster of Bath, chair of the Select Committee, who will be our keynote speaker this morning.
- ❖ We also await details of the Shared Prosperity Fund and the Local Industrial Strategies being produced by the LEPS and are watching with interest the renewed calls for a Devolution Framework for England with flexible governance arrangements for rural areas.

Today's Rural Conference is concentrating on building and sustaining rural economies. In response to feedback from previous years we have included some interesting and informative plenary sessions and workshops covering the different elements that contribute to a thriving rural economy: including affordable housing delivery, discussions on a rural strategy, health and wellbeing, and smart transport solutions, as well as building a successful rural economy. As ever there will be plenty of opportunity for your direct involvement,

and we have as usual a wide-ranging and eclectic range of speakers.  
So enough from me now...