

Rural Services Network Annual Report to LGA Leadership Board

SIG Name:	RURAL SERVICES NETWORK
Lead Member:	Councillor Cecilia Motley (Chairman) (Shropshire Council)
Lead Officer:	David Inman Director

Email:	david.inman@sparse.gov.uk
Address:	Kilworthy Park Tavistock. Devon PL19 9DF
Telephone:	01822 813641
Website:	www.rsonline.org.uk

Membership

Membership is open to County, District, and Unitary Councils who are predominantly rural or have rural areas.

The RSN has two main Subsidiary SIGs. **SPARSE-Rural** (with 126 members) which mainly deals with our financial representational (distributional) work and performance issues and the **Rural Assembly** (with 151 members – including the SPARSE-Rural members) which deals with all non- financial distribution and performance issues and with rural policy generally. These groups both meet on the same day three times a year (March, July and November) when all members are entitled to be represented. The Sparse Rural Sub Group meets in the morning with the Rural Assembly meeting after lunch.

An Annual Rural Conference is held in the second week of September in Cheltenham and there are four free to member seminars held annually.

Within the Local Government “family” there are two further LGA recognised Sub Groups of:

The **Rural Unitaries Group** which has 11 members and seeks to evolve arguments which are common to rural unitary councils that are either identified by Government as being Predominantly Rural or having Significant Rural areas.

The **Rural Fire and Rescue Services Group** which has 16 members and seeks to present arguments common to County and Combined Services operating in areas that have significant rural areas.

Authority and organisation membership can be found on www.rsonline.org.uk

Aim *[brief overview of SIG's main aim]*

Our ultimate long term objective remains unchanged: It is to network across all English rural areas so that the views of rural people, communities and businesses – and those of the bodies that provide services to them – can be gathered and articulated at the national level. Rural areas are contained in over 240 English Council areas. Now that the Commission for Rural Communities has gone we are the sole organisation dealing independently with rural services in England. To achieve our desired network therefore we are dependent on support from all of those Councils. That is a very sizeable challenge but if rural areas are to continue to be given any joined up national focus it seems this is the only route which can now be pursued.

For **SPARSE-Rural** our first priority will remain the funding formulae and the impact of the massive public expenditure reductions and their ultimate impact on public services. Of course, in 2016 and beyond we will also be extremely active in respect of the Needs Review announced by the Secretary of State in the Final Settlement and in respect of the move to 100% retention (by the sector) of Business rates and the re-distributional methodology.

We will continue to work with, and support, the work of the Parliamentary **Rural Fair Share Group** which now involves over 140 MPs from rural constituencies.

For the **Rural Assembly** our priorities will be to seek to influence Government and Policy Makers across a whole range of issues facing rural service providers and communities. We set these out in a “Rural Services Manifesto” which we launched ahead of the May 2015 General Election and we are closely monitoring the way government responds to the issues.

We continue to provide the Secretariat to the **All Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services** at Westminster and to support its work.

With the demise of the Regional Development Agencies and the Commission for Rural Communities we have sought to introduce a number of important initiatives over the past few years.

- Rural England as a Research body (a registered Community Interest Company)
- Service Groupings in relation to individual RSP member service areas. Housing, Health, Fire, Rural Crime, Economic Development and Transport Groups have all been established creating an array of networking opportunities back into our RSN member authorities through the links formed as very a much needed response to the austerity measures.
- A system of area forums and seminars across every rural region in England.
- A Rural Policy and Research and Practitioners Group operating across the United Kingdom examining current rural issues and exemplifying best practice.

We will continue to seek to play a significant role in giving voice to rural issues and to provide the significant network to assist rural areas across England and the people who live and work there.

Key Activities / Outcomes of work undertaken *[please keep this section to a maximum of one side of A4]*

The major outcome from our work in 2015 is the increase in Rural Service Delivery Grant to £80.5M in 2016/17 and, along with others, achieving an unprecedented level of change between the Provisional and Final Local Government Finance Settlements through the introduction of Transitional Relief.

In the 2015/16 year SPARSE-Rural and the Rural Assembly respectively debated:-

- The RSN Neighbourhood Planning Evidence Base Service
- Party Manifestos
- BIS Committee Report to which the RSN had submitted evidence – this led to a subsequent presentation to the Group by Royal Mail.
- Transformation Challenge – receiving best practice presentations from some of its member authorities
- Rural Housing (on several occasions especially in relation to the Housing and Planning Bill)
- Devolution
- A presentation from Neil Parish MP the Chair of the EFRA Select Committee.
- Results of RSN Sounding Board Survey on the impact on services of budget cuts.
- A presentation from Julia Mulligan the PCC for North Yorkshire on rural policing issues and the results of the National Rural Crime Network's (NRCN) National Rural Crime Survey (the RSN provides the secretariat to the NRCN).
- The proposed Buses Bill
- The RSN's Rural Fair Share's Campaign (at each of 3 SPARSE-Rural meetings)

In addition to its free Seminar programme, the RSN also put on three very successful Conferences:-

Rural Housing 9th July, 2015 - House of Lords

Rural Conference – 8/9 September, 2015 - Gloucestershire University, Cheltenham

Rural Health – 29th January, 2016 – House of Lords

The RSN is not however just about meetings. We provide a range of services to the membership and we see ourselves as seeking to provide the opportunity for information exchange and best practice identification across Local Authorities with rural areas and their communities and their business organisations.

The website rsnonline.org.uk is the country's leading source for rural information with tens of thousands of subscribers to its weekly email news digest

Please return to: memberservices@local.gov.uk by 13 May at the latest.

Any queries, please contact marion.stribling@local.gov.uk / 0207 664 3040.