

RSP Vulnerability Group Meeting – 19 November 2025

AI Generated Notes

Summary

The Vulnerability Group Meeting, chaired by Nik Harwood, Rural Services Partnership Chair and Chief Executive at Young Somerset, focused on addressing health and wellbeing challenges in rural communities through presentations on housing quality, farming population health disparities, and support services for agricultural workers. The discussions highlighted significant health inequalities across the UK, particularly in rural areas, and explored various policy and organisational initiatives aimed at improving housing conditions, mental health support, and financial assistance for farming communities. The conversation ended with participants sharing successful community-based solutions and planning future engagement through surveys and seminars to better address rural health and wellbeing challenges.

Housing and Health Inequality Campaign

Joe Farrington-Douglas, Senior Policy Fellow at Health Equals, presented on the organisation's campaign to address health inequalities, particularly focusing on the impact of housing on health. He highlighted the 16-year gap in life expectancy across the UK and discussed Health Equals' creative campaign using "hazmat loungewear" to draw attention to the issue of damp, cold, and mouldy homes. The presentation emphasised the need for policy action to improve housing quality, security, and affordability, particularly in rural areas where one in five homes fail to meet decent home standards.

Rural Health Disparities and Housing

The group discussed rural-urban health disparities and the impact of housing conditions on military families and older adults. They explored how rural areas face unique challenges including damp homes, limited access to gas heating, and exposure to potential indoor pollution from wood-burning stoves. The Health Foundation's parent organisation works with NHS to address health inequalities through devolution legislation, though concerns were raised about the disruptive effects of ICB restructures and local government changes on rural communities.

RABI's Farming Support Strategy

Sandy Kapila, Head of External Affairs at RABI, presented their new strategy focused on supporting farming communities in England and Wales. He highlighted the challenges faced by farming people, including financial pressures, isolation, and mental health issues, and emphasised the importance of accessible and consistent support. Sandy discussed RABI's 2021 Big Farming Survey, which provided insights into the pressures faced by farming people and informed their new strategy. The strategy aims to improve access to support, strengthen resilience, and maximize reach to more farming people. Sandy also touched on the need for better understanding of rural communities' unique challenges and the importance of collaboration at local and national levels to ensure help is available and accessible.

Farming Well-being

Nik and Sandy discussed the challenges of reaching these communities, noting that while remote areas are identifiable, making services accessible in a timely manner remains difficult. The discussion also touched on the high suicide rates in the farming profession and the need for national institutions to better understand and address these issues, with a recent session in the Welsh Parliament highlighting regionalised efforts.

Universal Credit Challenges for Farmers

Belinda Sample from Citizens Advice Rural Issues Group raised concerns about the challenges faced by farmers and seasonal workers during the transition to Universal Credit, highlighting how the system is not well-suited for self-employment or seasonal work. She noted that grants intended for farming activities are often treated as income under Universal Credit, leading to imbalances and financial difficulties. Sandy acknowledged these complexities and explained that their service offers support to individuals in navigating the system, emphasising the need for better rural proofing in policy implementation to avoid unintended consequences.

Rural Workers' Advocacy Challenges

Belinda and the group discussed the challenges faced by farmers and rural workers, highlighting the need for a report that includes their perspectives. They agreed on the importance of advocating for rural communities and suggested involving government departments to address these issues. Ian Sherriff, from the University of Plymouth shared his experience with the Prime Minister's Rural Dementia Group and mentioned previous efforts to improve conditions for farmers, expressing concern that progress may have stagnated.

Rural Health Challenges and Index of Multiple Deprivation

The discussion focused on challenges and progress in addressing rural health and wellbeing, with particular attention to mental health services and the Index of Multiple Deprivation. The participants noted that rural issues require coordination across multiple departments and that progress can be slow but emphasised the importance of collaboration and proper measurement of rural disadvantage. Kerry Booth, RSN Chief Executive highlighted new developments in the Index of Multiple Deprivation, including a rural report that recognised some rural challenges but struggled to quantify others like benefit take-up, which impacts how rural deprivation is measured and may potentially affect funding allocation for rural areas. Kerry also made mention of the RSN's rural review of the IMD as well as the 10-year Health Plan.

Resilience Solutions and Future Opportunities

The meeting focused on rural farming resilience and community-based solutions. Sandy shared an example of a successful farmer cluster group in Keswick that improved business relationships through data sharing and collaboration. Jon Collins, Derby College expressed interest in having Sandy speak to students about RABI, and Jon suggested connecting with Landex. Nadine Trout, RSN Assistant Chief Executive announced a survey on rural issues and an upcoming Rural Health and Care seminar. The conversation ended with a call for participants to complete the survey and register for the upcoming seminar.