

## AI Generated notes

### Rural Services Partnership Vulnerability Group Meeting 20 November 2024

#### Summary

The meeting focused on the challenges faced by rural communities, particularly young and older people, and the need for tailored solutions to address these issues. The speakers discussed the impact of government policies on rural areas, the importance of partnerships and advocacy, and the need for a radical approach to address challenges such as child poverty and fuel poverty. The conversation ended with concerns about the government's focus on urban areas and the need for a bespoke offer within a framework to support rural communities.

#### Addressing Rural Youth Employment Challenges

Nik Harwood, the CEO of Young Somerset, discussed the challenges faced by young people in rural areas regarding employability and social mobility. He highlighted that Somerset's districts were in the bottom quartile of the Social Mobility Index, with West Somerset being the lowest. Nik emphasized the importance of understanding the individual needs of young people and not assuming they all want to leave their rural areas for urban opportunities. He also shared that Young Somerset is actively working on equipping young people with skills for self-employment and micro-enterprise, as these are common in rural areas. Nik pointed out that only a third of young people feel confident in selling themselves on paper, which could be a significant barrier to employment. Nik also discussed the importance of connections with employers and one-to-one support for young people in accessing employment opportunities.

#### Youth Employability and Rural Challenges

Nick outlined Young Somerset's approach to youth employability, particularly in rural areas, sharing their experience of setting up a pop-up shop and a permanent setup in Taunton, which has led to 36 young people finding full-time employment and 17 finding part-time employment. The organisation also runs a cafe in Taunton Library, which serves as a training facility for young people in hospitality, catering, and customer service. Nik emphasized the importance of aligning their enterprise work with other activities they offer, such as mental health therapy and alternative education provision. He also discussed the challenges of replicating their provision in very rural areas and the importance of building corporate relationships for funding and support. Nik concluded by answering a question about initial funding for their ideas, highlighting various sources such as existing funding, grant-making trusts, self-investment, and corporate relationships.

#### Winter Fuel Allowance Campaign Impact

Jane Gill, Senior Campaigns Officer from Age UK, discussed the winter fuel allowance campaign and its impact on older people. She highlighted that the government's decision to cut the winter fuel payment for those not on certain means-tested benefits would disproportionately affect low-income pensioners and those with high energy needs. Jane also mentioned that the government's decision would push an additional 50,000 people into poverty each year. She shared that Age UK has been campaigning against the decision since August, with a petition currently live and over 569,000 signatures. Jane also mentioned that Age UK has been in discussions with the government and has received responses from the Chancellor, Rachel Reeves. She concluded by stating that Age UK is regrouping after the budget announcement and is considering other measures to help older people. Belinda from Citizens Advice added that the media focus on the winter fuel allowance might overshadow other issues, such as the benefits freeze and child poverty. She also suggested that the government should make it easier for pensioners to apply for pension credit.

#### Addressing Rural Challenges and Policy

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive from the Rural Services Network discussed the challenges faced by rural communities, emphasizing that a one-size-fits-all approach to policymaking does not work for these areas. She highlighted issues such as expensive heating, lack of transport, and lower wages in rural areas, which can lead to increased fuel poverty and loneliness. Kerry also mentioned the importance of sharing personal stories with policymakers to influence policy changes. Nik expressed her concern about the society's acceptance of living in a double deficit model, particularly in rural areas, and the need for rebalancing the profits made by energy companies with the needs of the population.

### **Rural Impact of Autumn Budget**

Kerry discussed the impact of the Autumn Budget on rural communities. She highlighted the potential benefits, such as the £230 million funding for homelessness and rough sleepers, and the increase in stamp duty for second homes. However, she also expressed concerns about the lack of detail on how these funds would specifically benefit rural areas and the potential negative impacts, such as the freeze on fuel duty and the bus fare cap increase. Kerry also discussed the government's plans for local government funding, emphasizing the need for a fairer allocation of funds to rural areas. She mentioned the RSN's efforts to set up an all-party parliamentary group to advocate for rural communities and to provide briefings on policy implications.

### **Government Engagement and Poverty**

Kerry provided an update on the RSN's engagement with the government, highlighting a positive step in the Rural Affairs Minister's willingness to meet and discuss challenges faced by rural organisations. John Longden from Pub is the Hub discussed the challenges faced by rural pubs, noting that many are struggling to survive and diversify. He also expressed frustration with the government's lack of recognition of the importance of rural services and the interconnectedness of businesses in rural areas. Belinda from Citizens Advice shared her experience with the Child Poverty Task Force, noting that the government has started to recognise rural issues and the need for radical solutions to address child poverty. The meeting discussed the need for a radical subgroup to explore innovative solutions to these challenges.

### **Rural Communities and High Street Revitalization**

John Longden expressed concern about the government's focus on revitalizing high streets while neglecting rural communities. He highlighted the issue of local authorities losing powers and the lack of funds for community services. Nik agreed, noting the challenge of engaging young people in designing services and the need for a bespoke offer within a framework. They also discussed the issue of absentee landlords in town centres and the vulnerability of rural communities to the loss of services. The conversation ended with an emphasis on the value of partnerships and the need to stay informed about resources shared during the meeting.