



**Minutes for the Rural Services Partnership
Vulnerability Group Online via Zoom
Monday 25th April 2022
11am-12:30pm**

Present:

Graham Biggs MBE (Chief Executive, Rural Services Network & Company Secretary RSP) (GB)
Kerry Booth (Deputy Chief Executive, Rural Services Network) (KB)
Andy Clowes (Head of Customer Experience & Strategy) (AC)
Jo Giles (Customer Safeguarding Senior Manager, Cadent Ltd) (JG)
Nik Harwood (Chief Executive, Young Somerset & Director RSP) (NH)
David Inman (Corporate Director of Rural Services Network & Director RSP) (DI)
Jane Mordue (Chair, Citizens Advice Rural Issues Group) (JM)
Amanda Phillips (Priority Services Partnership & Engagement Lead, United Utilities) (AP)
Nadine Trout (Member Development & Support Manager, Rural Services Network) (NT)

Bethan Aldridge (minute-taker) (BA)

Speaker:

Nick Hubbard (RIG Research Lead, CA Sedgemoor) (NHu)
Steve Dowling (Public Affairs Manager, Association of Convenience Stores Limited) (SD)

The Chair, Nik Harwood, welcomed everyone to the meeting.

1. Apologies for Absence

Martin Fagin (National Secretary, Community Heartbeat Charity)
Beth Kennedy (CS Partnership Manager, Anglian Water)
Rev Richard Kirlew (Chairman of the Agricultural Chaplaincy Association)
Christine Lally (County Officer, Oxfordshire Assoc. of Local Councils)
David Rogers (Executive Cttee member, Oxfordshire Assoc. of Local Councils)
Hastoe Housing Association

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting (See [link to Minutes and Papers](#))

Minutes of the previous meeting 06.12.21 were accepted as a true record.

3. Matters arising were as follows:

3) Matters Arising: Youth Vulnerability Issues – Recovery and Resilience Post Pandemic:
Still an ongoing action for NH. He regularly speaks to Kayleigh Wainwright (UK Youth) but difficult to get a static view on rural vulnerability as there is so much change in youth services. Investment in young children may be heading in the right area. NH recommended reading the Executive Summary (P8) of the [Education White Paper](#) - cautiously optimistic re interesting model but only if investment comes through.
4) RSN Rural Vulnerability & Disadvantage Statement 2021: DI fed back that approximately 30 representatives from Town Councils wish to be on Panels for Younger and Older people to provide a rounded view on what this level of authority is thinking.

5) Rural Vulnerability: What is the impact of current pressures? Rural Transport: GB commented that RSN was very disappointed in the recent Bus Service Improvement Plans and the funding allocations. ([See RSN article on bus funding](#))

6) State of Care in County and Rural Areas: GB noted that he and the Chair of the APPG for Rural Services met the Care Minister recently. A survey of adult social care departments is currently underway to ascertain median costs whether that's on residential care, nursing care or domiciliary care, across the whole of their authorities.

4. Presentation on the Citizens Advice Rural Poverty Report 2022 ([see Presentation](#))

NHu gave a presentation on behalf of Citizens Advice. Its main purpose is to advise, help and support those who have problems. The second purpose is in research and campaigns. The Rural Issues Group is a Special Interests Group which supports the aim of campaigning.

Poverty - in rural areas is about "Costs" not just about income levels and the current cost of living crisis is impacting rural households and the economy. The report has been updated since January due to the speed of the increases etc. There is a concern that some people do not act rationally when dealing with their debt and crime, particularly burglaries, may increase particularly as detection rates are so low. Some will simply either not pay back their debt or choose to not pay back a debt where there is no custodial sentence eg rent.

A loss of payment on council taxes, lack of household spending on social activities and reduced spending on food in local shops has an economic impact on the local community.

Some of the recommendations from the report include a review of the ONS definition of poverty to reflect extra costs eg transport, increase further the National Minimum Wage, improve the Universal Credit taper rate etc. Please see the [Summary of the report, Hard Times](#), referred to by NHu. If anyone wishes to contact NHu directly, he can be emailed at: cab@hubbards.me.uk

GB thanked NHu for his excellent presentation which chimed with current commissions for the Rural Services Network (RSN), which includes looking at the cost of living through a rural lens, the levelling up agenda and our current campaign of [Revitalising Rural](#).

Action: GB would like to present the Poverty report to one of RSN's wider meetings.

NH commented that from his youth work and supporting their families, the pace of the change is affecting their ability to adjust to it. Also, if you are on fixed income, the amount of percentage changes is hard to understand with high levels of bewilderment. NHu agreed that it is hard for some to assimilate the information and that is why he uses "human interest stories" to explain the context of the impact etc. It is also why the report is called "Hopeless" as that is how many see their predicament.

5. Presentation on Economic and Social Contributions of Convenience Stores in Rural Communities: Supporting All Customers ([see Presentation](#))

SD gave a presentation on behalf of the Association of Convenience Stores Limited.

He discussed how the owners of rural shops have responsibilities as they are often isolated service providers as well and provide additional support to the more vulnerable in their communities. A new Open Access Guide "[Everyone Welcome](#)" (published 18th May 2022) seeks to develop the inclusivity of the local shop. It gives retailers and staff confidence to communicate/support customers with disabilities etc and provides the business with support to make reasonable adjustments in law.

Since the pandemic (when most local shops performed well economically), retailers have been reviewing their business models in line with the Equality Act 2010. A clear scope for them to develop the "purple pound" – those who are not as mobile or have certain disabilities who's shopping experience hasn't been the same as others. Looking at themes: brand benefits, community reputation and better customer experience for all.

The Guide provides recommendations for limited financial outlay and also helps to limit any costly litigation in the future that may result from the Equality Act by not acting now. It's all about reducing "barriers" and the guide also covers less visible protected characteristics including dementia.

78% of retailers completed a survey on the assessments they had done on accessibility of their shops and the results are being used as a current benchmark. SD would like to see changes to Capital Allowances which currently allows a business to claim back 130% on taxable profits so that they can claim for a range of eligible expenditure.

The unique reach of local shops, especially in rural communities does present an opportunity to improve shopping for vulnerable people. The "Everyone Welcome" Guide is a new resource which will help retailers go one step further.

JM commented how important it is to keep the village shop otherwise you live in a dormitory community. She also noted that although on-line shopping is great, she normally buys enough food for one or two but to shop on-line and to make it financially viable you have to buy more food and have a minimum spend. Therefore, the village shop is vital and also in providing local produce.

AC commented that the presentation has made him think about using the local shop as a community hub as his organisation struggles to engage with people in much smaller communities. Maybe using the shop would help to springboard messages to customers re affordability schemes that they may be eligible for etc. SD agreed that there was potential there to have those local relationships and an example was that some pharmacists use the local shops once a week to bring their services into the communities. Many customers still pay their utility bills via their local shop/post office. AC agreed as many customers still have top-up cards and Paypoint type services.

NHu observed that some of the points made with reference to supporting local shops resonated with his presentation ie if we have good local shopping, then there are no issues with transport and it may mitigate some of the cost-of-living issues re petrol costs. NH also agreed that using your local shop can help with loneliness and going to the shop every day is seen as an activity. Also local shops are becoming more creative in using other revenue schemes ie Amazon returns etc, return your parcel and hopefully buy something in the shop. NH's local shop, during the pandemic, started home delivery and employing young delivery drivers on bicycles and have continued it. SD agreed that many local shops had never done home deliveries before the pandemic, or they may have had an informal arrangement for a "regular" customer. During the pandemic, so many people were shielding, self-isolating etc that the shops have formalised the deliveries and have continued to offer this service eg via a website, app or phone. Re parcels, the local shop can also be the place where parcels are left for collection as well and another way of providing a service and an interaction.

SD noted that loneliness is a key factor for many people visiting their village shop. On average people in London spend four minutes in their local shop, in rural areas the figure can be as high as 10-12 minutes. This interaction for some, may be the only one they have all day. His organisation produced a [Wellbeing Guide for Retailers and Colleagues](#) in August 2021.

6. General Discussion

NH started off the discussion raising the issues of staff retention, staff recruitment,, staff well-being, young people and their families feeling isolated, fearful of their futures, worried about becoming homeless etc. NHu agreed that these were themes Citizens' Advice were dealing with because of people's vulnerabilities.

JG commented that she and the other utility companies find these meetings really useful bringing together all different types of organisations. She also noted that there is potential for the utilities to take a more holistic approach in how they deal with individuals/households who find themselves in these vulnerable situations. GB agreed that it is getting the message out to decision makers that is key. AP agreed with GB's comments and added that this year, United Utilities have decided to work with all their employees to get the message out as most will also be customers too and they are helping to spread the word about what services they offer and any help/support that is available and this also includes any partner organisations.

KB commented that she would like to build on these discussions for the Rural Services Network conference in September and potentially a dedicated session on the cost-of-living.

7. Any Other Business

No items were brought forward.

8. Close

NH thanked everyone for attending the meeting today which closed at 12:10pm.