
Minutes

SPARSE Rural and Rural Services Network Executive and Board of Director of the Rural Services Partnership Ltd meeting

Hosted: Online via Zoom
Date: Monday, 11th January 2021
Time: 11:15am – 2:30 pm

1. Attendance & Apologies.

Attendance:

Cllr Cecilia Motley (Chair)	Shropshire Council / Rural Services Network
Graham Biggs	Rural Services Network
John Birtwistle	FirstGroup plc UK Bus Division
Cllr Malcolm Brown (on behalf of Cllr Adam Paynter	Cornwall Council
Kerry Booth	Rural Services Network
Martin Collett	English Rural Housing Association
Cllr Robert Heseltine	North Yorkshire County Council
David Inman	Rural Services Network
Cllr Roger Phillips	Herefordshire Council
Cllr Jeremy Savage	South Norfolk Council
Cllr Peter Thornton	South Lakeland District Council

Apologies:

Nik Harwood	Young Somerset
Cllr Adam Paynter	Cornwall Council
Cllr Mary Robinson	Eden District Council
Cllr Mark Whittington	Lincolnshire County Council

2. Notes from the previous RSN Executive meeting held on 28th September 2020.

(Attachment 1)

Agreed as a correct record.

Matters Arising:

2.1 Subscriptions for 2020-2021

In view of the public sector 'pay freeze' the 2021/22 subscriptions should, it is recommended, revert to a 2% increase – plus the final year of the staged increases (rather than 2.75% previously agreed). This was proposed by Councillor Roger Phillips and approved by all in attendance.

2.2 Special Executive on Housing Policies

There was due to be a Special Executive Meeting focusing on the further development of our rural housing policies. Due to other work pressures this has not taken place but will be scheduled soon.

2.3 The special **APPG** which will look at Rural Planning issues is going to take place on 27th January and the Housing Minister is going to attend from MCHLG to discuss this.

Providing a voice for rural communities and service providers

Rural Services Network

Kilworthy Park, Tavistock, Devon PL19 0BZ

Tel: 01822 813693

www.rsnonline.org.uk email: admin@sparse.gov.uk twitter: [@rsnonline](https://twitter.com/rsnonline)

3. Rural Service Groupings with the RSN Structures. (Attachment 2)

Report to RSN Executive by David Inman, Corporate Director.

David outlined the main points in his report and confirmed:

- 3.1** The RSN has capacity to deliver the services specified in the report.
- 3.2** The approach would be developed on an area-by-area basis, targeting the villages of a specific size (generally 2750 population but with discretion to 2000 population). Areas where there are no SPARSE or Rural Assembly members would be targeted first.
- 3.3** The Village initiative would introduce the opportunity for smaller parishes that don't identify as 'market towns' – but are nevertheless service hubs for their rural area – the ability to join the RSN.

Members discussed various elements of the proposal and the Executive approved the creation of a Rural Village Service Group and the renaming of the current wider group to Community Associates group.

Progress on the group would be reported to the RSN Executive on a regular basis.

4. Provisional Settlement 2021/22 Draft Consultation Response. (Attachment 3)

Draft consultation response. (Attachment 3A)

Graham Biggs set out the main implications for rural areas regarding the proposals of increases in spending power to be funded primarily by Council Tax increases, and the detrimental impact on rural areas which already pay more on average than urban areas per head.

Frustration was noted on behalf of all by the delays to the Fairer Funding Review which has been progressing for several years without seeing any conclusions to the work from Government. It had now been pushed back further to 2022/23 'at the earliest'.

It was agreed by all present that the Chief Executive should finalise the response to the Government consultation on the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, due by 16th January 2021 and can be quite forceful in arguing against the unfair settlement for rural authorities.

5. Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision.

[Please click here to access campaign papers.](#)

Graham Biggs provided an update on the Revitalising Rural Launch event, which is being organised in conjunction with Lexington. The launch on 1st March 2020 will be aimed not at the RSN membership but at influencing key decision makers in Parliament and other organisations. A separate meeting will be held with the Membership in late March (to replace the Rural Assembly that was due to be held in April) to update members on the campaign.

6. Rural/Market Town Group update. (Attachment 4)

David Inman, Corporate Director discussed the report and updated the RSN Executive on the Rural/Market Town Group.

This item was only considered briefly due to the long discussion which included the RMTG in item 3.

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David confirmed that there are currently 156 Town or larger Parish Councils in membership of the group spread out across England. November 2020 saw two membership meetings of the group, one for the Councillor representatives (RMTG meetings) and one for the Clerks of the Councils (RMTG Clerks Advisory Panel meeting) which were well attended.

7. RSN Budget Reports.

7.1 Budget vs actual as mid-December 2020 & estimate 2021/22. (Attachment 5)

7.2 Draft Estimates for the four years 2021/22 to 2024/25. (Attachment 6)

Graham Biggs provided an overview of the two budget reports and responded to questions from the Executive including in relation to training and development of staff. Kerry Booth updated the Executive on some free training and support that has been accessed by the RSN recently for staff on areas such as social media and hosting meetings online through the ERDF. David Inman is still chasing outstanding invoices for the year 2020-2021 although there are now few of these.

8. Review of Recent Government Publications ‘Through a Rural Lens’.

Graham Biggs outlined the current approach of the RSN to provide a ‘Rural Lens’ of any key Government publications which are released, and three recent ones are below.

In relation to the issue of the rollout of Broadband, Graham advised the Executive that the Public Accounts Committee had recently published a fairly critical report on the rollout of Broadband which highlights the difficulties of rural areas in accessing decent broadband. Graham is working with the Chair of the APPG for Rural Services to send a letter to the Digital Minister, Matt Warman MP, on the issues for rural areas. The Rural Coalition is meeting next week and will also consider the issue of Rural Broadband.

There was a discussion amongst the Executive of the problems that rural areas face in the lack of decent broadband and that the RSN has long been campaigning on this as an issue on behalf of the membership.

8.1 Spending Review 2020.

[Please click here to access article ‘Comprehensive Spending Review – Key Rural Concerns’](#)

8.2 National Infrastructure Strategy through a Rural Lens.

[Please click here to access article ‘The National Infrastructure Strategy 2020 Through a Rural Lens’.](#)

8.3 The Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution.

[Please click here to access the ‘Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution’.](#)

9. Review of the Green Book: Towards a Greener Green Book Process – Introductions and Summary Section. (Attachment 7)

Graham Biggs explained that he has received the report by Pragmatix Advisory on the review of the Green Book. The report has been written for the Treasury and is in the language that is relevant to the Green Book. Graham has developed a summary for wider circulation in due course – once considered by all the Funders. The results of the review will also be sent to Rural MP’s so that they can understand that whilst recent changes are welcome, there is still

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a long way to go until Rural and its particular characteristics are properly considered in decision making.

10. National Rural Conference 2020. (Attachment 8)

Kerry Booth, Assistant Chief Executive discussed the report.

Kerry outlined her approach to the National Rural Conference 2021 as an online conference, over the course of several days in the Autumn which would be free to Rural Services Network members. It is felt that the RSN can build on the success of the online conference in 2020 having learnt some lessons about the best approach and what works well and what does not. The Executive discussed some areas for the conference, such as the ability to attract high profile speakers due to the convenience of it being run online, saving on time and cost of travel and the idea of including session on broadband and community broadband.

The Executive approved the recommendation of a National Rural Conference being held online in 2021 in accordance with the Revitalising Rural Campaign themes.

Whilst the importance of networking in person was also discussed, the benefits of the engagement from the conference, across the membership and the significant increase in delegates compared to an in-person conference was highlighted. It was decided that in future perhaps an alternative approach could be explored to enable in person networking at the Annual Meeting. Proposals on this would be brought back to a future Executive when the pandemic allows.

11. Any Other Business.

Councillor Jeremy Savage raised the issue of **the distance that rural residents may have to travel to get the vaccine** in the coming months. It was suggested that Councils may be able to assist with the provision of spaces for vaccine centres such as leisure centres.

It was noted that it is possible that the **May elections** to Councils would be delayed until later in the year.

An item discussed for consideration at a future meeting was the roll out of a greater **electricity network** to support the move towards electric vehicles, heat pumps etc. Not all rural properties had wiring which would be adequate to provide enough electricity to charge vehicles overnight. There should be a coordinated approach to the utility companies on this issue. This should be considered and explored at a future Executive meeting in the context of the recently published Energy White Paper.

The next RSN Executive meeting date is Monday, 15th March 2021.