Attachment A

Note of decisions taken and actions required

Title:	Rural Services Network SIG SPARSE Rural
Date and time:	11.30am, 14 July 2014
Venue:	Rathbone 1&2, Local Government House

Attendance:

Cllr Cllr Cecilia Motley (Shropshire Council); Cllr Carol Clarke (South Northamptonshire Council; Cllr Cameron Clark (Sevenoaks DC); Cllr Hilary Carrick (Cumbria CC); Cllr Nick Daubney (Kings Lynn and West Norfolk BC); Paul Over (Chichester DC); Cllr Myles Cullen (Chichester DC); Cllr Gordon Nicolson (Eden DC); Cllr Owen Bierley (West Lindsey DC); Cllr Lewis Strange (Lincolnshire CC); Cllr Ann Carter (Daventry DC); Revd Richard Kirlew (Church in Wales); Stewart Home (BID); Cllr Robert Heseltine (North Yorkshire CC); Cllr Margaret Squires (Mid Devon DC); Cllr Jane Mortimer (Scarborough BC); Cllr Malcolm Leeding (Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils); Cllr Peter Stevens (St Edmundsbury BC); Ken Pollock (Worcestershire CC); Andrew Bennett (Swindon BC); Lindsey Cawrey (North Kesteven DC); Madge Shineton (Shropshire Council); Cllr Michael Hicks (South Hams DC).

Officers: David Inman (RSN); Graham Biggs (RSN);

Apologies for absence:

Adam Norburn (Rugby Borough Council); Cllr Rupert Riechhold (ENC); John Birtwistle (UK Bus); Patrick Begg (National Trust); Cllr Eddie Tomlinson (Durham Council); William Jacobs (South Oxfordshire DC & Vale of White Horse); Cllr Jane Evison (East Riding of Yorkshire Council); Cllr Philip Sanders (West Devon BC); Cllr Chris Knowles-Fitton (Craven DC); Ian Miller(Wyre Forest DC); Alison Turner (Sedgemoor DC); Cllr Barry Rickman (New Forest District Council); Cllr Ken Potter (East Devon District Council); Richard Kemp (Suffolk Council); Cllr Jeremy Savage (South Norfolk District Council); Cllr Yvonne Bendle (South Norfolk District Council); Cllr Raymond Singleton-McGuire (Boston Borough Council); Cllr Mary Robinson (Eden District Council); Cllr Nigel Ashton (North Somerset Council).

Item	Decisions and actions

1 Apologies for absence

Cllr Motley welcomed all to the Rural Services Network SIG SPARSE Rural meeting.

Apologies were noted and would appear in the minutes.

2 Minutes of the last full meeting – 17th March 2014

The minutes the last full meeting were agreed.

3 Minutes of the last Executive Meeting – 23rd June 2014

The minutes of the last Executive Meeting were agreed.

4 Fairer Funding Campaign / Rural Fair Shares Group

Cllr Cecilia Motley and David Inman reported on the latest APPG on Rural Services. They expressed frustration about the preponderance of Parliamentary Officers as opposed to MPs at the meeting. David suggested that turnout might be improved by holding the meeting first thing in the morning as there was less chance the group would be in competition with other meetings. He recommended that Councillors within the network lobby their MPs locally to encourage them to attend.

On the approach taken, David said that the APPG Chair favoured a campaign-driven approach rather than an APPG style of presentation, so the "Rural Fair Shares" campaign had been developed accordingly. Communications with MPs needed to strike a balance between upsetting those who could potentially be prepared to fight the case of rural areas and adequately conveying the level of local feeling regarding the Government's unfair treatment.

Councillor Motley said that David and Graham Stuart were due to meet with Brandon Lewis MP the following day and they would press the point that the Rural Service Delivery Grant mechanism represents a strong opportunity to improve the delivery of rural services, if employed for the appropriate amounts.

Members made the following points:

- The impending election could be an opportunity to advance this agenda if the network can identify and focus on those issues which are important to rural MPs, including localism and community engagement. Cllr Motley said that RSN would be picking this up within the Network's work around party manifestos.

- Members suggested liaising with CCN and DCN colleagues to get further clues as to likely priorities going into the election. Members also expressed a willingness for joint working with these groups on the issue of funding.

- Some members felt that the parliamentary recess could provide an opportunity to invite MPs into their districts to see the issues they faced first hand. At the same time, David warned that the impending reshuffle may mean key ministers move roles which may complicate issues over the summer.

- Cllr Motley said that when the Government acknowledged the cost of rural as a real issue in 2012/13 this was due to the quality of information provided. MPs need concrete examples illustrating how specific areas are losing out due to local government funding.

- The Government had commissioned a short and sharp research

exercise targeted at identifying areas of additional rural cost. The work had been contracted to LG Futures and RSN were with the LGA on the project working group.

- The idea of cuts having a greater impact on rural communities was seen as possibly a difficult argument to prove quickly than the idea of services in rural areas becoming more distant from these communities more quickly than elsewhere.

- David reported that the view Brandon Lewis had expressed on the rural services delivery grant was that he had pushed this as far as possible on the basis of the limited evidence available. It was for this reason research had been commissioned. He identified any change in Government as a potential risk to the continuation of the grant.

- Members questioned how high rural issues were on the LGA's agenda. David responded that the breadth of LGA's coverage across all authority types meant that it was only likely to respond in general terms on issues such as local authority funding, as a whole.

- Members also noted a need to emphasise that with the concentration on adult social care issues in local authorities, and the impact that this was having across all other services.

- On Ministerial meetings, some members felt that a press release immediately after meetings confirming what was said may help to ensure Ministers stay focused on outcomes.

- Cllr Motley felt that density considerations had and were not receiving any scrutiny unlike sparsity issues where research and proof was continually called for.

While it was unlikely that MPs would vote against the Government so close to the elections there may be an opportunity to influence Government who still had to justify their decision not to assist rural areas further if the matter was not dealt with before an Election. If the research overran or was inconclusive, pressure should still be brought to bear on the possibility of putting money ahead of an announcement. In light of the findings from the study by DEFRA and DCLG regarding the increasing cost of rural areas, there is a case to be argued that money needs to be provided now to meet this increase as after the election will be too late.

Referring to the LGFutures study, Members asked whether money would be spent on getting figures for other areas of interest if the results of RSN work indicated that these would be useful. Graham Biggs responded that the main limitation was time in the event that this information was not routinely captured. SPARSE would ask all its members for whatever "evidence" they had so that could be collated and passed to LGFutures and DCLG.

On whether a common methodology for data capture would be advocated. David Inman said that this would depend on what information LGFutures will ask authorities to provide, but said there were often reasons for differences in how services were delivered in different parts o the community. For example,

he cited differences in how services access farms as opposed to other properties which could mean an extra cost of collecting refuse in these areas, as well as for delivering planning, environmental and transport services.

On the primary focus of the study, David said that the first priority would be establishing cost drivers.

5 Performance

David Inman said that members would receive quarterly performance information on recycling, benefit payments and the planning application process. The RSN team would be looking to add the amount of business rates received as monitoring on this was key to understanding financial ability.

Performance monitoring in Unitary Councils was being developed.

6 Budget Report

Graham Biggs introduced the new format for the budget. He said that rather than being listed by name, the budget was broken down by activity. In 2013/14 and 2014/15 a budget surplus was expected, but only because of the income targets for each activity. Forthcoming activity would depend on meeting these targets in this and future years.

Graham announced that the Rural Crime Network have submitted a bid to the Home Office innovation fund and were waiting to hear whether this had been successful.

While Graham saw the budget for the forthcoming year as secure, he identified members refusing to pay or withdrawing as an ongoing risk. He urged members present to speak to colleagues and encourage them to stay in membership if they became aware that they were threatening to withdraw. He emphasised that some authorities operate a default “no subscriptions” policy, but that this could be overcome by highlighting the cost benefits to officers and members.

David Inman confirmed that a letter had gone out to authorities not in membership to highlight how they stand to benefit financially from the work of the group and to authorities that who benefit indirectly from the work of the rural assembly. However, he commented that it was of course a very challenging time for the group to seek “new money” from authorities.

Members voiced their willingness to champion the network’s work in their own and in neighbouring authorities.

Cllr Motley thanked all for attending and closed the meeting.

NEXT MEETING 17TH NOVEMBER 2014