

MINUTES OF THE SPARSE RURAL AND RURAL SERVICES NETWORK EXECUTIVE, MONDAY 18TH NOVEMBER, 2016 HELD AT THE LGA, SMITH SQUARE, LONDON

Present:- Cllr Cecilia Motley (Chair) Cllr Robert Heseltine (First Vice Chair), Cllr Peter Stevens, Cllr Gordon Nicolson, Cllr Peter Thornton, Cllr Sue Sanderson (Observer), John Birtwistle (Transport).

Officers: - Graham Biggs (Chief Executive), David Inman (Director), Andy Dean.

Apologies: - Cllr Roger Begy, Cllr Derrick Haley, Cllr Adam Paynter, Cllr Janet Dunton.

Cllr Begy had been unwell and the Executive asked to send him their best wishes for a speedy recovery.

Cornwall Council would be written to see if there was a possibility of a Deputy also being appointed for Cllr Paynter.

1. Minutes of the Executive of 14th September 2015

- (1) The review of funding for Police Authorities had been deferred for a year.
- (2) The legal housing decision involving West Berkshire had been appealed by the Government.

2. Provisional Settlement

The situation was considered in detail. A settlement for 2016/17 and a profile settlement over 4 years had been set out through to 2019-20. Although RSDG was programmed to increase to £65.0 million by 2019-20 (back end loaded) cuts had been calculated on a new definition of Spending Power (core Spending Power) which included Council Tax. As Council Tax levels in rural Authority were higher, on average) than in urban areas the reductions proposed were consequently significantly higher in rural areas than urban areas. (Previously cut backs had been at a uniform percentage). Lincolnshire felt the loss to Shire Counties overall would be over £240 million. It was also felt surprising that this had only become apparent when the figures were examined in detail. No paragraphs in the settlement document had actually detailed this. Rural MPs were incensed.

- (a) A petition signed by 50 MPs had been sent to the Prime Minister (cc Chancellor and Communities Secretary).
- (b) RSN hoped to get, through Shropshire Council, a joint letter to the Prime Minister signed by the Leaders of a number of Counties/Unitaries.
- (c) A Back Bench debate which had involved some 40 MPs being critical of the Provisional Settlement had been held on the 11th January. The film of this and the Hansard extract would be circulated to all members with the message for Authorities to get or keep their MPs involved.
- (d) Graphs showing comparison member Authority to urban Authority were being prepared and would, it was hoped, be sent out on the week of the 18th January.
- (e) The consultation response sent in by Sparse Rural and the Rural Fire Group was detailed.
- (f) It was understood the Government wanted the matter concluded by the 11th February so there was very limited time to try to get this changed.

(g) All Authorities would be asked to provide to the RSN evidence of their service cuts and their hardship areas as part of this process. It was felt regrettable that the overall picture which would be produced could only be one from 80% of the rural areas of England because of the intransigence of authorities in the other 20% who continued to refuse to be involved with RSN.

(h) Authority was given to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Chair to take such further action as may be considered necessary.

3. New Homes Bonus

The draft response to the New Homes Bonus Consultation was approved with minor amendments, Delegated authority was given to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chair, to agree the final version in case further changes became necessary.

4. The Business Rate Based System

The Chief Executive outlined the position. For rural areas the equalisation system and the level of tariffs/top ups would be the key factor. The review of needs to be built into the new systems would be absolutely fundamental as this is where sparsity costs would feature. A massive amount of work on members' behalf was envisaged over the coming years.

It was decided to commission research to a sum of £5k from L G Futures mapping previous evidence on the sparsity situation and seeking to comment on the impact of sparsity in super sparse and average sparse areas to seek to avoid cliff edges. Work in relation to Pixel already commissioned was outlined.

5. Budget Report 2015/16 – 2016/17 and Conference Budget

The Chief Executive detailed the position which was complicated by 15 Local Authorities and 5 RSP organisations which had not paid to date. However, it was hoped a balance in the region of £17k could be taken forward to 2016/17. In that year the budget was still tighter with a balance of £7k estimated to go forward to 2017/18.

Graham also presented the Conference Budget which for 2015/16 showed a small surplus. Complimentary remarks continued to be received about the Conference.

The Chief Executive stressed that the rest of the Agenda showed how the organisation would have to reposition itself to show the widest possible brief over the next few difficult years. It was decided that the next Executive in September would be a full day one which would include a 'Blue Sky Thinking' session.

6. A Rural Information Exchange

A report was received on this important area that needed to be developed.

Three Knowledge Hubs had been developed:

- Local Government Finance
- Performance and Transformation
- Rural Service Delivery

Three further ones were planned:

- Planning and Communities
- Rural Economic Development
- Rural Housing

Long term Social Care and Education would need to be looked at.

In terms of conveying information, 6 member contact lists and 22 officer contact lists had been established. The information from the various bulletins sent out would now be reinforced by the use of this system.

7. Expansion of the Community Group

- (i) This report detailed how the Group's links in the communities of member Authorities could be expanded over the coming years. The present system that had an estimated reach of some 50,000 contacts, it was hoped to take that figure to a six figure one – an eventual target of 250,000 had been identified.

Information would be sought on:-

- Village Hall Committees
- Details of local village Pubs and shops
- Details of any Youth Clubs and Scout Groups
- Details of any Parish Council or community website in the hope of working in liaison with them.
- Details of volunteers for Sounding Boards (see next report)

A call was made for RSN to look to supplement the information contained on the ONS website where it was believed there was a profile of every individual parish in England

It was also hoped the new Transparency Fund for Parishes might persuade parishes to be involved more. Parishes were being encouraged to run their own public websites. It was suggested we work with NALC in this connection.

(ii) Sounding Boards and a Rural Panel

It was decided to expand the present system of two Sounding Boards (District and Parish Councillors) to a range attempting to capture:

- Young People (under 25) (suggested we work with Youth Clubs and Young Farmers Clubs here)
- Rural Businesses
- Rural Residents

Members asked for a Sounding Board of Rural Primary School Governors to also be considered.

It was hoped each Sounding Board could seek to comprise of at least 300 people (the number Gloucestershire University had suggested was representatively important).

Eventually, it was hoped that volunteers would come forward from those people in the 5 Sounding Boards who would be willing to constitute a cross representative spectrum of the rural population to be able to operate a Rural Panel.

8. Membership

RSN Membership currently stood at 154 Local Authorities (132 Sparse Rural: 22 Rural Assembly only). RSP membership was around 80.

The Executive asked for a list of the Authorities who declined to be in membership. The question was posed how would such Authorities present co-ordinated evidential material that would be essential to arguing the rural case for the forthcoming needs assessments. It was felt the total rural picture required would be incomplete without these Authorities contributing to it.

The Executive asked that information be compiled showing both the global sum won by the work of the Group in relation to financial representation and how that sum was felt to break down Authority by Authority.

9. Devolution

The position was discussed generally. There was concern that rural areas would again lose out in a situation that appeared to be dictated by urban mass.

10. A House of Lords Group

With the undoubted success of the Commons Group, it was decided to seek to form a Lords Group. This might be achieved by initially more Lords being invited onto the APPG and an annual meeting of those Lords at least once a year. Members asked that the following people be approached:

Lord Cameron, Lord Taylor, Lord David Clark, Baroness Byford, Lord Rupert de Mauley, Lord Henley, Lord Henley, Lord Ullswater, Baroness Redfern (North Lincs), Lord Clark of Windermere.

11. Rural Unitary Group

The Group planned to hold a seminar on Devolution led by the Leader of Cornwall County Council at Bath in the Spring. All RSN members would be invited.

12. Rural Fire and Rescue Group

Fire and Rescue Group membership had now reached 15 Authorities. A meeting had been held in Northampton before Christmas. The Group had responded to the Provisional Settlement Consultation and the Chair had written to the Chancellor about the impact of the cuts.

It was decided that, in future, there would be one Annual Meeting involving Fire Chiefs and members and at least one meeting each year of Fire Finance Officers. The first of the latter form of meeting was planned for a date in March.

13. RSN – ACRE – NALP Concordat

Andy Dean presented a draft proposal by Officers and detailed what was hoped to be achieved. The document was agreed by the Executive.

14. AOB

It was decided that in future every Assembly meeting would have a presentation on a policy item from Brian Wilson. These often might mirror the policy item he had last done for rsnonline.

It was also agreed that at the end of each meeting consideration would be given to the topical item which the meeting wished to identify and pursue in letters to Government and other appropriate Agencies.