
Agenda

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

Incorporating SPARSE Rural Members, Rural Assembly and Rural Services Partnership Members. All nominated members & officers of RSN are invited to attend this meeting.

Hosted: Online via Zoom
Date: Thursday, 2nd July 2020
Time: 3.15 pm

We will circulate an email with instructions how to join this meeting via Zoom in advance

1. **Attendance & Apologies.**
2. **Notes from the previous RSN Executive meeting.** (Attachment 1)
Held on 16th of March 2020 to consider any relevant updates and approve the minutes. Main issues discussed:
 - (a) Covid-19.
 - (b) Fairer Funding Review: Paper from Pixel on “measuring success”.
 - (c) MHCLG First Homes Consultation.
 - (d) Rural Strategy: Draft Project Plan for Further Work.
3. **Thoughts for the Future of the Network – report from Corporate Director.**
(Attachment 2, Attachment 2A)
To consider the attached papers.
4. **RSN Budget Report.** (Attachment 3)
To consider the attached papers and to agree the new format.
5. **Rural Strategy Campaign Progress – report from Chief Executive.**
(Attachment 4)
To consider the attached papers.
6. **COVID-19 Related Issues.**
 - (a) **Draft RSN Position Statements on various COVID-19 issues** (Attachment 5)

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(b) For consideration as part of the Rural Strategy work - Assessment of Rural Issues and 'Asks' for a COVID-19 Recovery Plan (Attachment 6)

(c) General Discussion on the work of the RSN and member engagement 'during lockdown' (Attachment 7)

7. National Rural Conference 2020 – report from Kerry Booth, Assistant Chief Executive. (Attachment 8)

8. Fairer Funding Review: Update.

9. Work of RSN and iEDO on LIS and rural economy opportunities – report from Nadine Trout, Member Development & Support Manager. (Attachment 9)

10. To note the Annual Report to the LGA. (Attachment 10)

11. Regional Seminars 2020 update.

North East & (West Midlands Regional Seminars) took place online on 19th May (and 30th of June 2020) and were received well. The team will endeavour to continue organising meetings online for the foreseeable future where possible.

Event	Rescheduled Date	Format and Platform
East Midlands Regional Seminar (Rural Skills & Education)	28.07.2020	Online via Zoom
National Rural Conference 2020	14 Monday 16 Wednesday 18 Friday 09.2020	Online via Zoom and possibly other platforms
North West Regional Seminar (Rural Vulnerability)	05.10.2020	Online via Zoom
Yorkshire Regional Seminar (Rural Housing)	02.11.2020	Online via Zoom
Rural Social Care & Health Sub Group	16.11.2020	Online tbc
RSN AGM	16.11.2020	Online tbc
Rural Assembly	16.11.2020	Online tbc

12. Any Other Business

The next RSN Executive is scheduled for Monday, 28th September 2020.

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Minutes

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

Incorporating SPARSE Rural Members, Rural Assembly and Rural Services Partnership Members. All nominated members & officers of RSN are invited to attend this meeting.

Venue: English Rural Housing Association,
7A Strutton Ground, Westminster, London, SW1P 2HY
Date: Monday, 16th of March 2020
Time: 11.15 am – 2.30 pm

[Please follow this link for the map of the venue.](#)

1. Attendance & Apologies

Attendance:

Cllr Roger Phillips	Herefordshire Council
Graham Biggs	RSN
John Birtwistle	First Group
Martin Collett	English Rural Housing Association

Remote attendance:

Cllr Cecilia Motley (Chair)	RSN & Shropshire Council
Cllr Jeremy Savage	South Norfolk District Council
Nadine Trout	RSN

Apologies:

Cllr Gill Heath	Staffordshire County Council
Cllr Mark Whittington	Lincolnshire County Council
Cllr Mary Robinson	Eden District Council
Cllr Peter Stevens	West Suffolk Council
Cllr Peter Thornton	South Lakeland District Council
Cllr Robert Heseltine	North Yorkshire County Council
Cllr Sue Sanderson	Cumbria County Council
Cllr Trevor Thorne	Northumberland County Council
David Inman	RSN
Kerry Booth	RSN
Nik Harwood	Young Somerset

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2. COVID-19

Agreed:

(a) Due to the ever-worsening situation it was agreed that all RSN & RSP meetings, regional meetings, seminars and rural strategy roadshows planned to take place until the end of April 2020 be cancelled/postponed. A decision about meetings from May onwards be taken by the Chief Executive in the light of prevailing Government advice.

(b) The Chief Executive and colleagues consider member engagement in the light of the prevailing situation.

3. Minutes from the previous RSN Executive meeting that took place on the 13th of January 2020. (Attachment 1)

Agreed as a correct record.

Arising out of the Minutes not elsewhere on the Agenda:

(a) Minute No 15. It was noted that the Meeting of the Fire Group planned for 11th March 2020 had been postponed until there was further information relating to funding issues.

(b) Minute No 17. It was noted that the West Midlands Regional Meeting/Seminar planned for 24th February 2020 had been postponed due to the flooding situation.

4. Minutes from the previous SPARSE Rural meeting that took place on the 27th of January 2020. (Attachment 2)

Noted.

5. Minutes from the previous Rural Economy Sub-Group meeting that took place on the 27th of January 2020. (Attachment 3)

Noted.

Arising out of Note 4.1 (i) The Chief Executive report that he had received from Cornwall Council the data circulated to LEPS by Defra.

Arising out of Note 4.4 The Chief Executive reported that the liaison with the Institute of Economic Development was continuing.

6. Fair Funding Review: Paper from Pixel (Attachment 4) and Letter Sent to Local Government Minister. (Attachment 4A)

The paper from Pixel circulated with the agenda was noted.

The Chief Executive reported that over the previous weekend he had received the "summary" paper from Pixel. He outlined the main issues – based on the Pixel modelling – District Members would be seriously affected by the proposals relating to sparsity/rurality in the Needs Formula if they proceed. It was agreed that at this time the RSN would not make an offer to MHCLG to carry out further research.

The letter of 25th February to the Local Government Minister was noted and supported.

Agreed:

The summary paper, referred to by the Chief Executive, and the tables of impact at authority level to be circulated to the Executive; after which it would be circulated to all SPARSE-Rural members suggesting they might wish to brief their MPs. The Chair of the Rural Fair Share would be taking the issue up with Ministers.

7. RSN Budget Report. (Attachment 5)

The Budget report was noted. The Chief Executive reported that virtually all subscriptions (RSN & RSP) had now been received. The balance at the end of the Financial Year (31st March 2020) was likely to be slightly bigger than that indicated in the report.

In answer to a comment from Martin Collett the Chief Executive agreed that the format of the budget would be simplified for 2020-2021 onwards.

8. British Standards Institute Proposal “Successful Rural Communities”. (Attachment 6)

The British Standards Institute (BSI) has been in touch to explore how we might work with them on a new project, the brief outline of which is attached.

The report and documentation were noted.

9. LGA Special Interest Group – Rural Services Network. (Attachment 7)

Recent email from Marion Stribling, Member Services, LGA.

It was noted that the LGA's Leadership Board agreed last year that SIGs (which includes the RSN) would be formed for 5 years after which each SIG would have to make a case to the Leadership Board for the SIG to continue. Annual Reports would continue to be required in the meantime.

10. Rural Services APPG and Rural Fair Share Group – Update. (Attachment 8)

The Minutes of the APPG AGM held on 28th January 2020 were noted.

Item 6 above had dealt with the Rural Fair Funding Group whose new Chair was Derek Thomas MP.

11. MHCLG First Homes Consultation. (Attachment 9)

Agreed:

That the RSN respond to this Consultation along the lines of the Briefing Note prepared by Jo Lavis for ACRE.

Martin Collett referred to the Planning for the Future Paper from MHCLG and agreed to send details to the Chief Executive. This was an area where the RSN, the Rural Housing Alliance and other rural interest groups needed, as far as possible, to take a common view.

12. Carbon Net Zero and Rural Communities. (Attachment 10)

The briefing paper prepared by ACRE for its membership and the Rural Coalition was noted.

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13. Queens Speech Briefing Related to RSN Priorities. (Attachment 11 & 11A)

This document was noted.

Close attention would be paid to the legislation as it was introduced into, and progressed through, Parliament.

The Chair reported on the meeting held on 3rd March 2020 with members of the (former) House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy and some other Peers with whom the RSN liaised. They were prepared to continue to press the need for a Rural Strategy at every opportunity.

14. Rural Strategy: Draft Project Plan for Further Work. (Attachment 12)

Agreed:

(a) The Project Plan to be agreed.

(b) That the Chief Executive consider opportunities for engagement with members on this – especially in the light of planned meetings having to be cancelled for some time to come.

15. Membership Engagement Plan: Report by Nadine Trout. (Attachment 13, 13A & 13B)

Nadine Trout, the recently appointed Member Development and Support Manager for the RSN, introduced herself and gave details of her background.

Nadine took the Executive through the Membership Engagement Plan and the rationale behind it.

The Executive were 100% supportive of the proposals and again re-enforced the need for member engagement and that the RSN was still working on their behalf in these turbulent times.

Agreed:

The Membership Engagement Plan to be approved and the Member Development and Support Manager be tasked to deliver the plan.

16. Any Other Business.

John Birtwistle referred to the APPG Minutes and a County APPG inquiry launched on 6th March to investigate the decline in rural bus services. He also referred to the plethora of new funding streams and the proposed National Bus Strategy. He agreed to prepare a briefing note on these issues by Mid-April.

John also suggested Ben Colson as a Plenary Speaker at the Conference. His theme would be along the lines of “Professionalisation of Community Transport”. The Chief Executive agreed to look into this.

Cllr Roger Phillips report that The Fire Authorities (not just Rural) had funded a post as a Lead Finance Officer (an Officer from Devon & Cornwall Authority) to input views into the upcoming Spending Review.



THOUGHTS IN RELATION TO THE FUTURE OPERATION OF THE NETWORK

A Paper for Consideration by the RSN Executive – 02.07.20

This report examines the RSN's current major strengths and weaknesses at this challenging time, in relation to our services to our Local Authority members.

Local Government as a whole, but rural councils, have gone through a torrid time in the last decade. The substantial increase in costs and losses of income due to COVID-19 have made the position much worse. Whilst Government has provided £3.2bn of extra grant that is nowhere near enough to offset those costs/lost income.

In terms of the RSN income over 75% of income comes from that source and this income flow is coming under pressure.

This report (Parts 2 and 3) explores wider emphasis on nominated members and canvasses active local contact/engagement sessions with member authority representatives through targeted zoom sessions. It is hoped that such a system and accompanying measures would secure a feeling of greater involvement in the work of the RSN (and ability to influence it) from all principal council member authorities and thereby greatly improves the retention situation.

This report also refers (Part 4) to trying to widen the Rural/Market Town Group and create a Rural Parish Group to increase the spread of income.

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 We have an organisational base that effectively pivots from the Special Interest Group (SIG) principal council local authority membership. Over 75% of our income comes from this source. We need to recognise however we are slowly losing this base as 'austerity', or whatever it is now called, bites ever harder and members consequently resign. Given the impending recession this climate is unlikely to improve. This report suggests action looking to protect this existing membership by the RSN providing a clear local as well as national presence to its local authority members.

1.2 Since 2016 we have lost the following previous members: Aylesbury, Barnsley, Cheshire West and Chester, City of York, Dover, Fenland, Folkstone and Hythe, Horsham, Northants CC, North Warwickshire, Rotherham, Swindon, Tonbridge and Malling, Telford and Wrekin, Warwick, Wycombe, and through the new Dorset Unitary decision not to support us East Dorset, West Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, and Dorset County Council. West Sussex has gone down to Assembly level from Sparse level.

1.3 We will lose Sevenoaks and Surrey on 31st March 2021 and RSN may be under threat at Harrogate, Newark and Sherwood and now since invoicing in April at Huntingdonshire, Tunbridge Wells, East Lindsey and Essex.

1.4 In 2011 we had a membership that had reached 152. It is at 120 currently and, as said, under more threat.

1.5 Financially from this side of its operation the organisation has lost £35k per annum over the last five-year period.

1.6 Looking at trends our ultimate viability from principal council membership is often determined by the view of individuals (Leaders, CEO's Finance Officers, or budget holders) without any appreciation of our role and member services. Unfortunately, whilst our product is often praised this will not save us from what are often budget driven. Sometimes these "decision makers" will refer to a member budget committee for rubber stamping. Sometimes decisions seem to be made in a totally arbitrary way.

1.7 We do have a real problem with some authorities in terms of engagement with our services.

1.8 Kerry has been doing some recent analysis. Here are the statistics in relation to those who appear reluctant to engage with our services. There are:
 44 authorities who did not engage with any of our meetings/seminars/conference in 2019.
 21 authorities who have not engaged in any of our meetings/seminars/ survey feedback in 2020
 And 21 who have not engaged with any of our meetings/seminars in either year.

1.9 Once an authority has left, we find it is enormously difficult (nay impossible) to get authorities to change their mind, even if the decision-making individuals are no longer with the authority. Our main financial base is therefore shrinking year by year and, in the longer term, we will not be able to support it by coming up continually with extra income sources. The service needs to penetrate

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deeper into authorities' thinking so that we have more supporters within authorities who support our SIG group membership but somehow this must be done as a financially break-even process.

1.10 We consider bringing some annual local engagement' into our services involving principal councils is necessary to make membership with us more locally attractive - in addition, to our national representational and campaigning roles.

1.11 It is felt we are going to have to produce a system that has some direct involvement from the RSN which is closer to the authority. If we can stoke up enough local interest in the 'home' offices, we will therefore become better and wider known and hopefully more respected within authorities. Our work is likely to be read more often and become more appreciated and valued. Looking at the recent trends we currently are not as deep rooted as we need to be.

1.12 We run a system where we have the Rural Services Partnership and the National Centre for Rural Health and Care giving organisational width and much needed income (circa £20,000 and £18,000 p.a. respectively). We also work with the Rural Housing Alliance. However, with no disrespect whatsoever intended, all these initiatives probably add little to our 120 principal authorities' perception of who we are and what we do and our worth/value to them.

1.13 Outside of the Bulletin service, we are in the main reliant for contact with members from the 4 London Meetings, the seven Regional Meetings/Seminars, and the annual National Rural Conference. Attendances, particularly in London, are not brilliant (and never will be given rural membership peripherality) and our participating representatives seldom are the 'key' individuals from their authorities. The current COVID situation and the ensuing recession will not assist at all.

Selling Points

1.14 It is felt we have three main selling points:

- (a) We argue LG Finance from the rural perspective – something neither the CCN nor DCN (nor LGA) can do as they have urban as well as rural members.
- (b) We run a network across rural areas - probably the strongest one numerically in rural England and the only one with a service focus. We think it fair to say we are respected by those involved for doing this – our problem is that, within our membership, too few officers and members currently think rurally.
- (c) We are now known as a campaigning organisation as personified by Rural Fair Share Campaigning and our current Rural Strategy Campaign – campaigning is something we demonstratively have strength in doing and we probably need to emphasise that role.

1.15 We have been largely reliant for our support on the LG Finance formula discussions. We have kept much of our base because Districts have seen that in supporting us the outcome can be much a larger 'return on investment' (in comparison to their annual subscription to us) for their finance base. The change to a Business Rate driven system (if that is to proceed) will remove the regularity of Government formula distribution decisions to a four-year settlement and that could make things more difficult from that viewpoint. However, on the other hand, it will allow us to campaign over a

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period of years towards announced and defined goals instead of reacting to government announcements as we have to do with annual settlements.

Threats

1.16 In terms of viewing our subscription, many councils categorise it either as a national subscription, alongside the LGA sub itself and either the CCN or DCN or a 'grant to other organisations'. Councils look to comparisons of derived benefit with their County and District SIGs (CCN and DCN). A District or a County template obviously fits exactly on the administrative area of a Local Authority whereas their consideration of the rural characteristics of their area may not be that consistent. Even the smaller market towns will not necessarily see themselves as rural as their output area classification may be argued to demonstrate. Cities, County Towns and the larger market towns will indeed consider (rightly) themselves as urban thinking and the Defra categorisation 'Urban with Significant Rural Areas' almost makes that very point itself. If looking at political advantage for the aspiring councillor, alignment with the DCN or the CCN or indeed a CCN/DCN/LGA role will always be the more attractive option.

1.17 Finance Officers level (especially in County and Unitary Authorities with Social Care responsibilities) may see greater affinity with being on their networks officer teams arguing for their "class of authority" rather than our rural financial arguments.

1.18 Now 'rural' in too many Counties and Districts, as rural often is in England, can be conveniently overlooked and under-appreciated. It is necessary to build up that rural base mainly from the bottom if that situation is ever to change.

Our firm conclusion is that we need to create (and support) RSN 'Ambassadors' within our member authorities.

The Rural Advantage

1.19 The one advantage rural consideration has is in terms of public perception is that people outside of Local Government have natural affinity with either the Rural and Urban characteristic because they will think in terms of being either a rural or an urban dweller. Seldom however will they have any idea about what tier of Local Government does what in relation to their services. Nor do the CCN, DCN and quite often the LGA mean anything to them at all. With the populace at least the characteristic of area they live in is important to them (it is just councillors and sometimes MPs who get seduced by other 'in speak' paths and jargon!).

1.20 The Government has created a significant void by its decision to close the Commission for Rural Communities. Defra often works with the Rural Coalition and that banding involves a lot of organisations (including the RSN) from a rural base but it does not and cannot reach down to rural areas directly except through its member organisations.

PART 2: THE CREATION AND SUPPORT OF RSN "AMBASSADORS" WITHIN OUR MEMBER AUTHORITIES

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(a) Nominated Councillors considering the Rural Case

2.1 We agreed a process here previously but have not progressed it to date for fear of rocking the boat during austerity. It now seems vital that we seek to get authorities to appoint a nominated councillor together with a formal Deputy. We have then, two Councillors ('Ambassadors') showing expressed interest in rural issues in every member authority. This has previously been largely agreed by the Executive. We think we should use the 'Call for a Rural Strategy' and life/rural economies after COVID-19 to be the explicit reason for calling for these nominated councillors at this time. It is felt it would be useful to say in this request that it would be helpful, if the authority operates through a cabinet system, that one of these two members should be a Cabinet member.

2.2 We feel also we should be providing these Councillors with a special News/Information Digest called maybe something like 'The RSN INSIDER (Nominated) Councillor' which we should seek to send out (say) four or five times a year. (Again, the Executive have agreed this previously). This newsheet should obviously use some of the bigger stories which we have covered over the previous 8/9 weeks but also – often through links - draw reference to our organisational thinking and activities as we proceed with initiatives. Unlike the Bulletin this publication should be part of the RSN policy involvement/engagement processes. We might hope to categorise the following in it: LG Finance, Essential Infrastructure (Buses and Connectivity etc), Economy, Public Health and Well Being and the NHS. These Digest could obviously invite comment to their nominated RSN Senior Team Member (see Part 3 below).

2.3 (This 'focused' publication may in the future possibly also - under a different title and slightly varied format - be considered for wider use once it has been established (i.e. Rural MPS).

2.4 If we can develop our service at local level it is felt these Councillors can play a far more strategic role with RSN to the benefit of both their councils' and to RSN's benefit by our having 'Ambassadors' within member councils.

2.5 What then are the opportunities to operate more locally?

(b) 'An Annual Discussion Meeting' with the nominated members and an RSN officer.

2.6 It is considered that we should look to set up a system of Authority Annual Discussion Meetings (via zoom) between a senior member of the RSN staff and the two nominated councillors and the senior Officer representative for the member authority. The appropriate Portfolio Holder within the Authority could also be invited to participate. These meetings would follow a standard format and would seek to enable the RSN to document the authority's rural view across the spectrum of our operation allowing the completion of a collective record of the authorities' views on the RSN agenda and providing local input from all representatives of our rural areas.

2.7 This it is felt would considerably assist in ensuring guaranteed local rural input into our strategy and thinking and ensure all member authorities were involved in RSN's processes. It

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is felt imperative given the position relating to rural services nationally that we undertake this initiative at the present difficult time for rural areas where it is vital rural issues are considered.

2.8 It is thought that the areas which (at present) should be given consideration in the agenda for these meetings include: -

- ~ Fairer Funding (Sparse Authorities Only)
- ~ Rural Services (including Health and Public Health)
- ~ Current RSN Campaigns- like the 'A Call for a Rural Strategy'
- ~ The Rural Economy (including COVID-19 recovery)
- ~ Rural Vulnerability

2.9 We currently have no real collective evidence around how members deal with rural issues.

2.10 It is suggested this also could be an item on the proposed Annual Discussions Meeting Agendas with member authorities so that we can find out how our member authorities normally look to deal with rural issues in their authority systems and we can establish and catalogue what the trends are across our membership.

2.11 It is further suggested that we would ask the round of meetings in any year to particularly focus and document on one or two of these 5 topics framing a view on the local situation in relation to it. Thereby the meetings would give us information back about local's views and experiences - so in effect giving us evidence nationally going forward.

2.12 These 'Meetings' would constitute over 120 one-hour local meetings each year but the resulting evidence from these will, it is considered, be of very great value to us in arguing the rural case and we hope all of our members will welcome the opportunity to be involved in this way

2.13 We consider this to be a good use of Senior RSN staff time and involves little RSN Technical/Administrative time. That said, if the Executive agrees the principles of the proposals made in this report overall, we will ensure, section by section, that the staffing implications across the RSN Team can be accommodated before proceeding.

Benefits to RSN from the Rural Consideration Scheme Proposed in this Report.

- (A) **2.14** If the scheme worked as planned, there would, for the first time, be readily available opportunity for involvement by **every** member authority locally without cost to them. We think this is particularly important. We do consider this is a vital element of the scheme and the important difference from our existing operation.
- (B) **2.15** The documented outcomes from the annual discussions and surveys should reflect both individual areas thought, and local experiences. If authorities cooperate it would come from all areas and be a local account from all our Principal Councils. This would very much assist

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by providing to RSN a jigsaw each year on our members and areas thoughts, views, and experiences for the very first time.

- (C) **2.16** These meetings will provide a real opportunity to clearly show (and hopefully document on the website) the building blocks of our national arguments for the first time. We would suggest that the documentation produced will be of considerable assistance in our rural fair share, rural vulnerability work, with our campaigning, and in our rural service work generally.

PART 3: KEY OFFICERS IN MEMBER AUTHORITIES

3.1 In addition to our current general contact arrangements, which of course stretch widely across authorities and which are added to as people request service, it would in our view be good to have five specific 'key' liaison officers in each authority serving the following fields:- (a) Public Relations (b) Democratic Services (c) Economic (d) Public Health in Upper Tier Authorities, and (e) Financial Argument.

3.2 These seem the most essential conduits we most regularly employ and perhaps they now need to be specifically recognised. In our existing listings we should of course have these contacts already but it might be helpful to very briefly tabulate the exact role we hope to achieve with these officers and this could be set out in the updating literature we send out annually.

3.3 Hopefully in terms of the key officers this could be more of a two-way process. For example, in addition to the issues about rural consideration I set out above it would be good to be more aware of and maybe to be able to engage more with the authorities' media strategies and know more about authorities' viewpoints and work in relation to their rural economies.

3.4 We have recently agreed that all management board members should be listing and getting our material.

PART 4: GREATER INVOLVEMENT FROM LOCAL COUNCILS

4.1 Given the success to date of our recruitment to a Rural Market/Towns Group, it is hoped we can widen our conduits with local (Parish/Town) councils particularly in member areas. We would ensure member local councils can also, through RSN survey work, provide their local views on their rural situations.

(1) Towns

4.2 There are 5.2 million people who live in settlements or areas classified as 'rural town and fringe' in England. This figure is based on a definition where rural towns are places with a population under 10,000 and which have a population density pattern distinguishing them from smaller settlements. Rural town and fringe areas therefore represent 9% of the country's population.

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4.3 If settlements are instead sorted by size band, there are 615 small towns which have a resident population between 3,000 and 10,000. (Some smaller settlements could be considered as being functionally towns.) At the other end of the spectrum, some larger towns have been classified by statisticians as rural 'hub towns', because they perform a significant role as service and employment centres for surrounding rural areas. There are 176 settlements listed as rural hub towns.

Rural towns by population size (2011)

Settlement population size band	Number of small towns	Resident population
3,000 to 4,999	321	1,130,700
5,000 to 6,999	159	939,000
7,000 to 9,999	135	1,250,500
Rural hub towns (up to 30,000)	176	
Total	791	

Rural town and fringe areas are the location for over 180,000 registered businesses, which between them employ almost 1.25 million people.

4.4 We are already putting together a grouping of Rural/ Market Towns which currently stands at around 80 members.

4.5 We have approached at least one town in each of our District/Unitary member areas and all the Shire Counties are covered in this 80.

4.6 Success rate currently at say c33 percent is better than originally hoped for and there is clearly potential to increase the size of the Group. It is felt we should, when the time is right, seek to double the size of this group and try to also target having where possible a Market Town representative in each member area.

(2) Parishes

4.7 There are, it is believed, some 8,000 rural parishes in England of very markedly varying size.

4.8 Currently the RSN give Parishes (and Towns actually) free community service IF their Districts or Unitary Councils are our members. That service is almost entirely restricted to the weekly and monthly Bulletin Service. It is suggested this continue but this restricted service be labelled in future the 'Rural Community Associates' service so there can be no confusion with 'Groupings'. That then would give us scope to develop a further Local Council Groupings relating to English Parishes; (APPENDIX 'A' SHOWING THE SUGGESTED FORMAT AND RETURN SERVICES IS ATTACHED).

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4.9 If approved by the Executive, we will look to work across 4 County/Unitary areas first in relation to the extra Market Towns and the parish recruitment work. The 4 areas initially to be involved will be Cornwall, Hampshire, Leicestershire, and Northumberland

(3) A System of Local Rural Profiles

4.10 We would like to introduce a system of local social & economic profiles for the areas of all our all our principal councils as a service – for the local (parish/town) councils in membership groups with us. Whilst this will inevitably be County and/or District data (because information is only available at those levels) it is felt wide circulation of it will assist in the overall rural consideration we seek to engender.

PART 5: RURAL PANEL AND RURAL SOUNDING BOARDS

5.1 It is clear we need to add more certainty into how we operate this system. We have talked about it previously and it now needs to be introduced. This is however a fairly time consumptive process and it needs to be modelled with the staff.

RURAL PANEL (with CCRI)

5.2 Rural England runs a Rural Panel (seeking to be statistically valid but not yet achieved) with CCRI. They have the addresses of people who have agreed to be involved. However, it is at best a bi-yearly exercise.

RSN SOUNDING BOARDS

5.3 It is suggested these should be employed by the RSN at least twice a year focussed on the Rural Strategy themes.

PRINCIPAL COUNCILS SOUNDING BOARD

ENGLISH RURAL PARISHES SOUNDING BOARD
RURAL/MARKET TOWNS SOUNDING BOARD
RURAL SMALL BUSINESSES SOUNDING BOARD
RURAL YOUNG PEOPLE' S SOUNDING BOARD

We will bring back to the Executive in the autumn a detailed outline showing how we would suggest this area of work is undertaken.

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Proposed service to the Community Associates and Subscription Groupings

I set out here the proposed services for the Rural Community Associates and the Subscription Groupings proposed.

RURAL COMMUNITY ASSOCIATES – **Free** provided District or Unitary Council is an RSN Member.

- Rural Bulletin Service (Weekly)
- Rural Bulletin Service (Monthly) – Funding and Consultations

ENGLISH RURAL PARISHES GROUP – **£50** per annum plus VAT for Parishes of up to 3,000 population and **£70** p.a. for Parishes exceeding 3,000 population.

- Engagement through Consultation processes in the Rural Strategy campaign to ensure that specific feedback from all Member Parishes is included within the process.
- Receiving the Rural Bulletin, a weekly newsletter provided by the Rural Services Network highlighting rural news, issues affecting rural communities, and highlighting the work of the Rural Services Network.
- Rural Bulletin Service (Monthly) – A Newsletter on Funding and Consultations.
- An Annual National Forum Session (remote meeting via Zoom) involving all member English Parishes to look at specific Parish issues across England relating to the RSN's National work and with a second part to that meeting concerning Rural Vulnerability in Parishes across England and its inter- relationship with Utility Companies services. Booking by Eventbrite.
- Development of some good practice and learning material related to the key policy areas and delivery challenges or opportunities for rural parishes.
- Involvement in a Rural Parishes Sounding Board to establish the Rural Parish view across England on issues as they arise.
- Whilst statistical information is almost always presented by Government at County and/or District level it is vital the messages this contains are known about across rural areas as a whole. We will issue an area rural statistical profile once a year to member Parish Councils.

RURAL/MARKET TOWNS GROUP – **Average £130** per annum plus VAT [Previously agreed by the Executive] (Available for Rural /Market Towns and Market Villages up to 30,000 in total population)

- Engagement in Rural Strategy campaign to ensure feedback from Rural/Market Group is included within consultation.
- Receiving the Rural Bulletin, a weekly newsletter provided by the Rural Services Network highlighting rural news, issues affecting rural communities, and highlighting the work of the Rural Services Network.
- Involvement in a Rural/Market Town Sounding Board to establish the view of market towns across England on rural matters as they arise.
- Rural Bulletin Service (Monthly) – Newsletter on Funding and Consultations.

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- Whilst statistical information is almost always presented by Government at County and/or District level it is vital the messages this contains are known about across rural areas as a whole. We will issue an area rural statistical profile once a year to member Councils.
- Development of some good practice and learning material related to the key policy areas and delivery challenges or opportunities for rural/market towns.
- An Annual National Forum Session (remote meeting via Zoom) involving all member Market Towns to look at specific Rural Market Town issues. Booking by Eventbrite.
- Provision of a dedicated Spotlight quarterly newsletter highlighting current issues in Rural/Market Towns.
- Periodic online surveys of the members of rural/market towns, to gather comparative information about topics of specific interest to this grouping.

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	A	B	C	D	E
1					Attachment 3
2					
3	The Rural Services Partnership Limited				
4	Budget vs. Actuals: RURAL SERVICES PARTNERSHIP - FY21 P&L				
5	April 2020 - March 2021				
6		ACTUAL at 15/06/20			
7		Actual	Budget	over Budget	% of Budget
8	Income				
9	Coastal communities contract income	1,111.16	5,557.00	-4,445.84	20.00%
10	National rural conference	40.00	120.00	-80.00	33.33%
11	RHCA Membership	6,050.84	32,153.00	-26,102.16	18.82%
12	RSP Membership	7,472.83	19,744.00	-12,271.17	37.85%
13	Rural England Annual Re CHARGES		6,789.00	-6,789.00	0.00%
14	Rural England project support		1,300.00	-1,300.00	0.00%
15	Rural fire and rescue	3,190.00	3,923.00	-733.00	81.32%
16	Rural housing group subscriptions	4,365.00	7,175.00	-2,810.00	60.84%
17	Rural housing group website	1,460.00	2,227.00	-767.00	65.56%
18	Rural Strategy Income	6,097.92		6,097.92	
19	Rural Towns Group	5,780.00	11,020.00	-5,240.00	52.45%
20	Services	131.87		131.87	
21	SPARSE - Rural general grant	117,587.00	301,586.00	-183,999.00	38.99%
22	Strategic partnering arrangements		10,000.00	-10,000.00	0.00%
23	Total Income	£ 153,286.62	£ 401,594.00	-£ 248,307.38	38.17%
24	Cost of Sales				
25	Wages	32,451.32	204,110.00	-171,658.68	15.90%
26	Total Cost of Sales	£ 32,451.32	£ 204,110.00	-£ 171,658.68	15.90%
27	Gross Profit	£ 120,835.30	£ 197,484.00	-£ 76,648.70	61.19%
28	Expenses				
29	Accountancy	683.00	2,500.00	-1,817.00	27.32%
30	Bank charges	7.80	90.00	-82.20	8.67%
31	Coastal communities contract	1,870.63	5,721.00	-3,850.37	32.70%

	A	B	C	D	E
32	Communications	2,940.90	28,741.00	-25,800.10	10.23%
33	Databases	1,053.60	7,000.00	-5,946.40	15.05%
34	Employee Pension Costs	510.22	6,123.00	-5,612.78	8.33%
35	EMPLOYER Pension contributions	1,275.54	4,600.00	-3,324.46	27.73%
36	Employer's NI contributions		11,017.00	-11,017.00	0.00%
37	FAIRER FUNDING WORK	7,500.00	27,500.00	-20,000.00	27.27%
38	Insurance	275.00	1,175.00	-900.00	23.40%
39	IT Support	183.77	700.00	-516.23	26.25%
40	Legal and professional fees		13.00	-13.00	0.00%
41	Meeting Room Hire		1,500.00	-1,500.00	0.00%
42	Paye	5,371.58	39,190.00	-33,818.42	13.71%
43	Printing, postage stationery and phone	689.81	4,786.00	-4,096.19	14.41%
44	Professional subscriptions	182.00	550.00	-368.00	33.09%
45	Rent and service charge	2,141.25	9,800.00	-7,658.75	21.85%
46	Rural England Service		7,000.00	-7,000.00	0.00%
47	Rural health conference expenses		1,500.00	-1,500.00	0.00%
48	RURAL STRATEGY EXPENSES		20,200.00	-20,200.00	0.00%
49	Subscriptions		5,700.00	-5,700.00	0.00%
50	Travel and subsistence	-171.58	15,000.00	-15,171.58	-1.14%
51	HOUSING		500.00	-500.00	0.00%
52	Parliamentary		800.00	-800.00	0.00%
53	Regional Meetings		500.00	-500.00	0.00%
54	RSP Meetings		£ 500.00	-£ 500.00	0.00%
55	Total Travel and subsistence	-171.58	17,300.00	-17,471.58	-0.99%
56	UK Corporation Tax		1,000.00	-1,000.00	0.00%
57	Unapplied Cash Bill Payment Expense	7.15		7.15	
58	Uncategorised Expense	£ 119.80	£ 2,000.00	-£ 1,880.20	5.99%
59	Total Expenses	£ 24,640.47	£ 205,706.00	-£ 181,065.53	11.98%
60	Net Operating Income	£ 96,194.83	-£ 8,222.00	£ 104,416.83	-1169.97%
61	Net Income	£96,194.83	-£ 8,222.00	£104,416.83	-1169.97%
62	BALANCE BROUGHT FORWARD FROM 2019/20		£ 18,901.00		

	A	B	C	D	E
63	BALANCE CARRIED FORWARD to 2021/22		£ 10,679.00		
64					
65					
66					
67	RE ANNUAL CHARGES INCOME BREAKDOWN				
68	Back Office	1457			
69	Staff Costs (Incl Vuln Panels)	3000			
70	Website	2332			
71					
72	TOTAL	6789			
73					
74					
75					



CHIEF EXECUTIVES REPORT TO THE RSN EXECUTIVE 2ND JULY 2020

RURAL STRATEGY CAMPAIGN 2020 'REVITALISING RURAL – REALISING THE VISION' PROGRESS REPORT

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 The Executive at its last meeting on 16th March (Minute No 14 refers) approved a Project Plan to take forward the Rural Strategy Campaign by producing documentation under the title 'REVITALISING RURAL – REALISING THE VISION'.

1.2 It was agreed that this would be based around the five foundations of productivity set out in the Government's Industrial Strategy, although it would also make cross-references to the Grand Challenges expressed in the Industrial Strategy where appropriate (these being Artificial Intelligence and Data, an Ageing Society, Clean Growth and the Future of Mobility).

1.3 It was further agreed that the RSN documentation would also link to current national policy priorities, such as 'levelling-up' and the Government's 2050 Net Zero target.

1.4 The thrust of the new document would be to demonstrate how rural areas can help the Government achieve its aims and to identify barriers to rural areas doing so (citing ways in which those barriers might be addressed). It will seek to show that boosting rural productivity requires action across economic and social agendas, since in practice these are inextricably linked.

1.5 That was, of course, "pre-COVID-19"

2.0 PROGRESS TO DATE

21 It was agreed that the following policy topics would be covered (and mapped against the five foundations of productivity). All of these have now been prepared - Section Numbers set out below.

22 I say "prepared" but that is an exaggeration. What has been completed is (for each one) sections on (a) Why it matters; (b) The National policy context and (c) The rural dimension. What have still to be developed for each one is, the "Policy Solutions" (3 or 4 practical – and realistic – policy ideas). See the next Section of this

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report on RSN Membership Consultation for thoughts as to how to progress this next stage of the work.

23 Attached to this report is the Chapter 6 to date relating Local Enterprise Partnerships and Local Industrial Strategies - as an example.

24 The Sections are:

People: (taken as referring to the rural workforce)

- Training, apprenticeships and further education (including businesses' digital skills) Section 8
- Access to affordable housing Section 11
- Transport and access to jobs or opportunities Section 3

Infrastructure:

- Digital connectivity (broadband and mobile) Section 1
- Electricity network capacity, e-charge points and renewable energy Section 2

Business environment:

- Local Enterprise Partnerships and Local Industrial Strategies (Section 6
- UK Shared Prosperity Fund and business grants Section 12
- Access to business advice and training Section 16

Places:

- Land use planning system Section 7
- Rural town high streets Section 10
- Accessible health and care services Section 4
- Sustaining village schools and other local assets Section 5
- Role of Parish Councils and community action Section 9

Ideas:

- Sustainable farming and land management (to include migration/migrant workers – although those issues will also be referred to the Health and Social Care context too) Section 14
- Decarbonising rural economies and communities Section 15
- Managing an ageing rural population Section 13

25 Cross references are/will be built-in, where appropriate, to fair funding and the need to level up in rural areas. Where appropriate Sections refer to issues for younger people and highlight specific 'Rural Vulnerabilities'.

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3.0 HOW TO PROGRESS THE NEXT STAGES OF THE WORK

COVID-19 Issues

3.1 Item 5(a) on the Agenda for this meeting of the Executive is a draft RSN Position Statement on current COVID issues and item 5(b) is an Assessment of Rural Issues and Asks. Where appropriate these will need to be “weaved-in” to the relevant Sections of the Re-Invigorating Rural Document.

3.2 We see this as a further part added to the end of the Sections as currently drafted but with the “Asks” picked up within the (yet to be drafted) Policy Solutions part of each Section – perhaps just one or two strategic COVID specific issues in addition to the 3 or 4 practical policy ideas previously referred to. 3.3 COVID-19 issues/context will also be highlighted in the front end/introduction to the document.

3.4 Of course, there is likely to be a lot of overlap, anyway, between what we'd want as a rural COVID-19 response and what we have been saying we want based on the earlier Rural Strategy campaign e.g. from LEPs and LIS. In some ways, the C19 concerns just underline them or make them more urgent. Though we don't doubt there will also be some new things to say as a result of COVID-19.

Timescale

3.5 The original target date for completion was the end of August 2020 so that we could launch it at the 2020 Annual Conference.

3.6 With the 2020 Conference now not proceeding in its normal format (now to be on-line format spread over 3 days) we consider a separate launch in October/early November is more appropriate. This gives time for consultation with the membership (see below) and for final “sign-off” by the Executive at its 28th September meeting.

Member Consultation

3.7 There is a bit of a conundrum here. We know how stretched our members (especially our local authority members) are at present supporting their communities through COVID and that subjects like the Rural Strategy Campaign are not particularly high on their list of priorities. On the other- hand we really do want to give members the opportunity to engage with the documentation being prepared – especially with regard to the “Policy Solutions” we will be proposing.

3.8 On balance, we feel we should – whilst acknowledging the pressures they are facing send out the Sections most relevant to member representatives (for instance

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access to affordable housing to Housing and planning officers and the respective Portfolio Holders and RSP housing members) and seek any comments they may have on the Section to date but specifically asking (perhaps through a pro-forma) for on the Policy issues. We would, of course, list all of the Sections and offer to send any of the others they might be interested in.

39 We suggest running the consultation referred to above until straight after the Executive meeting until the end of July.

3.10 We would then consider all the responses received along with our own thoughts) and draft the Policy Solutions Section for each Section in the first three weeks of August. That could then be sent out again (to all members but specifically as personalised e mails to those who responded to the first consultation). This consultation would be over the last week of August and first week of September. to enable us to reflect on comments received over the following two weeks and prepare a final draft for sign-off by the Executive on 28th September [this implies it could not be sent to the Executive until a few days before the meeting – if that is acceptable to the Executive?

THE VIEWS OF THE EXECUTIVE ARE SOUGHT ON THE WAY FORWARD AS SET OUT IN THIS REPORT

**Graham Biggs
Chief Executive
15TH June 2020**

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APPENDIX

RSN DRAFT

REVITALISING RURAL – REALISING THE VISION

Local Enterprise Partnerships and Local Industrial Strategies

Why it matters

Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) have significant policy responsibilities for supporting and investing in economic growth. They are, therefore, important bodies for the future wellbeing of rural economies and communities.

It is a widely held view that the track record of LEPs addressing the economic needs of their rural areas is mixed. Their preference for large strategic developments and projects has often led to a focus in or around urban centres.

Productivity levels in rural businesses are below the national average. By narrowing this productivity gap the national economy would receive a considerable boost (as would local rural economies).

The character of rural economies, heavily reliant on small and medium sized businesses, needs to be reflected in any business support. That includes micro-businesses, sole traders and social enterprises.

Creating better quality and more productive jobs in rural areas would bring widespread benefits and, properly targeted, could significantly help those left behind rural places.

The national policy context

Key elements of national policy include:

- Economic growth and productivity – there are 38 LEPs which, between them, operate across the whole of England. For central Government they are the main vehicle to deliver local economic development. By 2021 Government will have used LEPs as the channel to invest £12 billion in local businesses and economies (including for infrastructure). That funding was assigned as Government signed Growth Deals with individual LEPs to agree their local priorities. LEPs help co-ordinate business support and guidance through local Growth Hubs.

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- LEP governance – the Government intends that LEPs are local partnership which are business led, though their funding streams are often local authority managed. A review conducted in 2018 streamlined the governance arrangements for LEPs and introduced an expectation that two-thirds of their Board members should come from the private sector. Following the review all LEPs must publish an annual delivery plan and end of year report, setting out their activities and progress made during the previous period.
- Local Industrial Strategies – from 2020 all LEPs (or Mayoral Combined Authorities, where they exist) have been required to publish a Local Industrial Strategy (LIS), based upon evidence and consultation, and setting out an economic vision for their area. They should coordinate and align local economic policy and national funding streams with that vision. The overarching objective of a LIS is to grow investment in skills, industries and infrastructure in order to boost productivity and create quality jobs. Unless rural evidence is properly reflected in LIS documents there is a risk that they understate rural needs (a point not helped by the paucity of small area data).
- Business grant support programmes – LEPs have been the delivery vehicle for grant funding from EU Structural Funds. When these are replaced by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, LEPs will assume responsibility for managing its grant streams (see the section on UK Shared Prosperity Fund and business grants).
- Skills Advisory Panels – these partnerships have been established to help LEPs meet the upcoming skills needs of their areas, taking account of the LIS. The Panels comprise representatives from local employers, local authorities, colleges and universities (see the section on access to business advice and training).

The rural dimension

There are 545,000 businesses registered in predominantly rural areas. This is 24% of all businesses registered in England¹. The number of unregistered micro-businesses (for PAYE or VAT) is probably at least as great again.

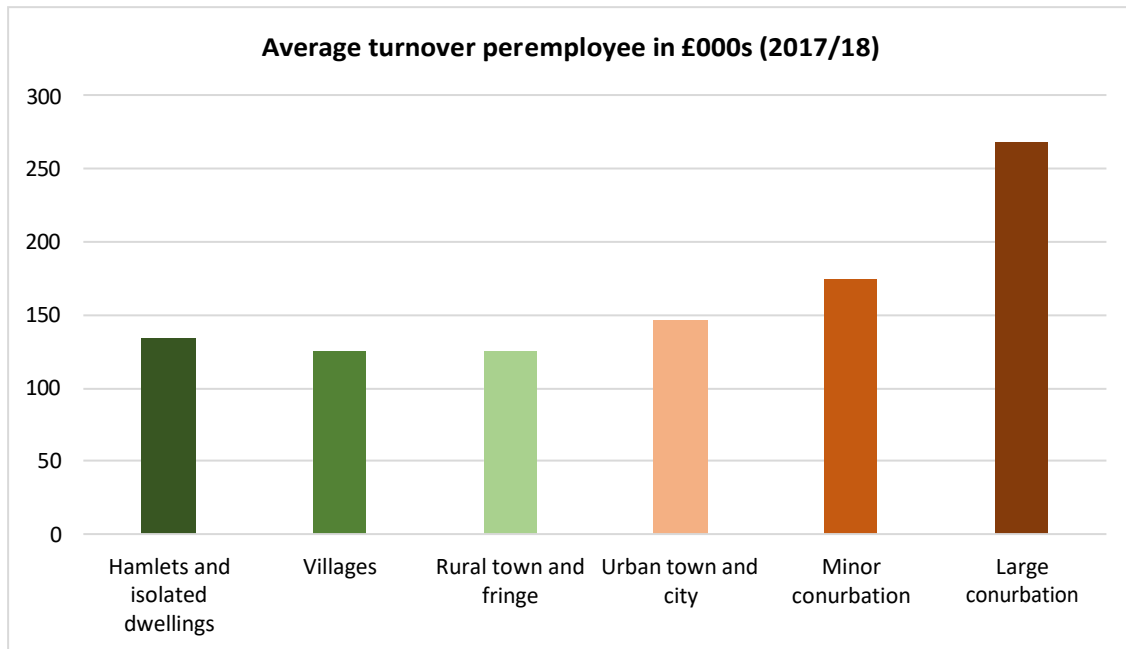
Those registered rural business have a combined annual turnover of £459 billion. This is a sizeable contribution to the national economy. However, business turnover per employee is lower in rural areas than it is in urban areas.

¹ *Statistical Digest of Rural England*, Defra, based on 2017/18 data from Inter-Departmental Business Register

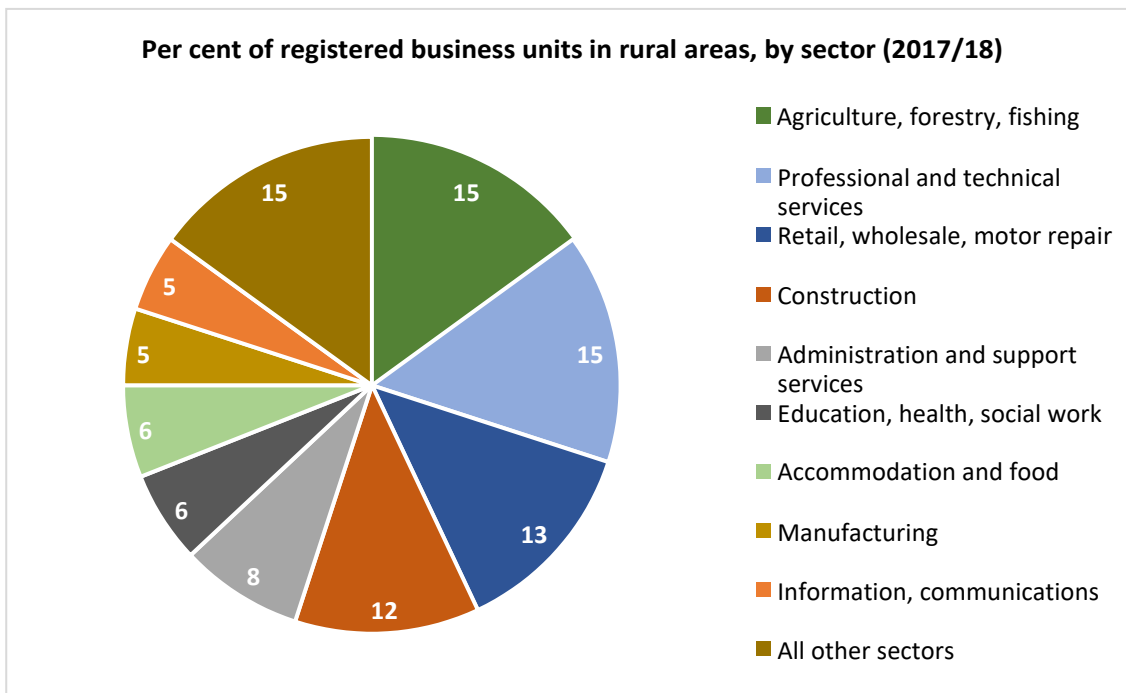
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Rural economies are diverse, hosting a wide range of businesses. Land-based businesses (including farming) are important, but 85% of rural businesses are from other sectors. Other key sectors are professional services, retail and construction. The picture will vary in different types of local rural areas, with some being heavily dependent on tourism, for example.



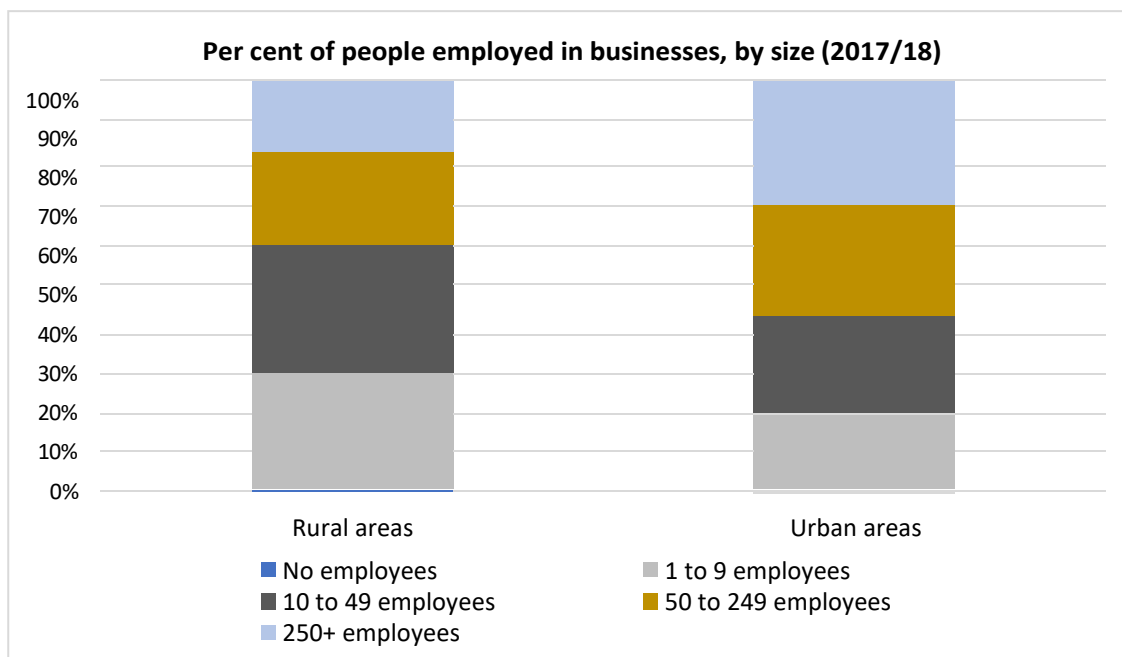
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Small businesses are especially important in rural economies. Measuring those people who are employed in registered business units, 84% of them in rural areas work for a SME. Indeed, 32% of them work for a micro-business.



Just over 4 million people are employed in registered business units in rural areas². They comprise 15% of all people employed in registered business units across England.

Home working (including by the self-employed) is significant in rural areas and particularly so in the smallest settlements³. 22% of those who are employed in rural areas work at least half their working week at home, compared with 13% for those employed in urban areas.

² *Statistical Digest of Rural England*, Defra, based on 2017/18 data from Inter-Departmental Business Register

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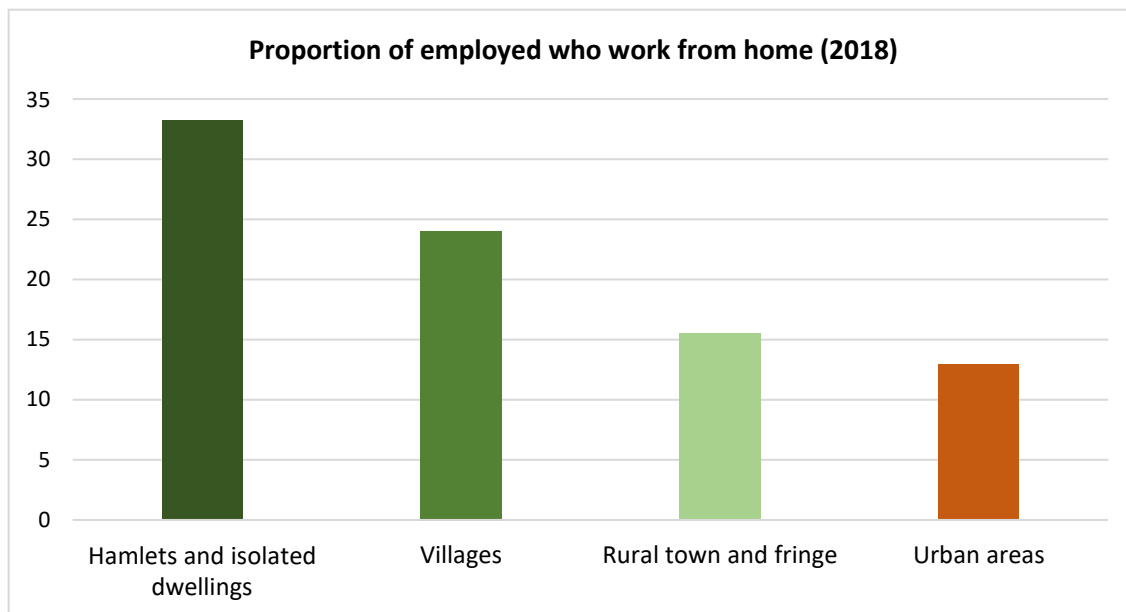


³ *Statistical Digest of Rural England*, Defra, based on data analysis from the Labour Force Survey

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Earnings (mainly from wages) for jobs which are based in rural areas are lower than for jobs based in urban areas⁴. Even if London is excluded, average earnings in predominantly rural areas are £1,800 or more than 7% below the predominantly urban equivalent.

Workplace based median gross annual earnings (2019)	
Predominantly rural areas	£22,500
Predominantly urban areas (excluding London)	£24,300
Greater London	£36,800

Policy solutions

TO BE IDENTIFIED AND ADDED AT A LATER PROJECT STAGE: three or four practical policy ideas.

BW, v 1.2 (1st April 2020)

⁴ *Statistical Digest of Rural England*, Defra, based on data analysis from Annual Survey of Hours & Earnings



Support to Local Authorities

The huge combined effects of increased demand for services and loss of income mean that many Councils face the prospect of being unable to balance their budgets.

- **Councils risk having to cease all non-essential expenditure.** Government must immediately reassure Councils that they will provide adequate financial support to cover the extra costs and lost income.

Small Business employment and self-employment

- **Rural areas are showing sharper rises in Job Seeker Allowance and Universal Credit claims than urban areas.** Furlough scheme should be retained for longer in hardest hit rural economies.
- **Loss of income through the pandemic causes a significant number of businesses to close or go into administration.** Current support programmes for SMEs and the self-employed should be sustained whilst restrictions are in place. They should be withdrawn gradually to reflect the variable impacts of social distancing. Local Industrial Strategies should have a rural strand wherever their area includes rural localities. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund should include a dedicated rural funding stream. This rural economic development programme should be flexible in scope, have locally determined priorities and be locally managed. It must be ready for launch in 2021.
- **Some businesses face immediate cash-flow challenges and rapidly declining cash reserves.** The Government-backed business loan scheme and the furloughing scheme should be sustained whilst restrictions remain in place and is likely to need retaining longer for sectors where social distancing slows their ability to reopen in a financially viable way. Many small firms will not be able to take on more debt through loans.
- **Some self-employed businesses are ineligible for the Government support schemes and so may not survive e.g. those recently set up or who operate as directors paid a dividend.** The recently announced Local Authority Discretionary Grants Scheme cannot yet be evaluated as each authority will draw up its own scheme. Self-employment plays a disproportionate part within rural economies. HM Treasury should consider again how it could provide support to some of these self-employed businesses.

Farming

- **Many farms are losing income.** Certain producers have struggled, as rapid economic change during lockdown reduced demand for their products e.g. dairy farmers and suppliers to the restaurant trade. The grants on offer to dairy farmers are welcome. Government should monitor the situation and be ready to extend such grants if that proves necessary. Post-CAP funding for the agricultural sector should be aligned to be sympathetic with the post-pandemic needs of the sector.
- **Farmers lose valuable income from diversification businesses such as retail and tourism.** It is important that diversification businesses continue having access to

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financial support whilst restrictions remain in place (especially those most impacted by social distancing measures). Grant funding due to become available under the UK Shared Prosperity Fund needs to be open to farm diversification businesses.

Support to deprived and low-income rural households

- **Welfare benefits backlogs.** DWP and Jobcentres should employ additional staff needed to ensure backlogs are avoided. Citizens Advice should maintain or boost its rural presence.
- **Increased personal debt.** Banks/building societies, utility providers, mortgage providers and others should adhere to best practice and provide interest-free periods. Need for re-training schemes in rural areas.
- **Growing prevalence of fuel poverty and food poverty.** Local authorities and others should be supported to help ensure appropriate levels of support are in place to help rurally accessible foodbanks, poverty action projects, etc., to meet growing local needs.
- **Many rural households are likely to have significantly less income over the next year or more, not least as a result of job losses.** Withdrawal of furlough scheme should be tapered, so businesses can resume their activities when it is financially viable for them to do so and take staff back on gradually.
- **Increasing demand for affordable or social housing.** A Homes England managed fund should be created to kick-start investment by Housing Associations, recognising additional costs associated with small rural sites. Local government should be encouraged, with financial support, to make full use of its powers to bring forward new affordable homes.

Rural Town High Streets

- **The cumulative impact of business closures and social distancing rules is a threat to town centre vitality and sustainability** as critical mass is lost. Sizeable town centre regeneration initiatives may be justified in the worst hit places.
- **A significant number of high street businesses close or go into administration.** The multiples sector may withdraw from rural areas to save on distribution costs. Business Rate Relief in 2020/21 for the retail sector is welcome. The furlough scheme should be reduced only gradually as trade picks up.
- **Further bank branches are closed, and ATMs lost** as people continue making cashless payments wherever possible, having got used to doing so during the period of restrictions. The Payment Systems Regulator should revisit its earlier work and closely monitor trends, especially for people who still largely depend on cash. The Post Office network should continue promoting its service offering people access to a wide range of bank accounts.
- **Small retail and food businesses find social distancing difficult to implement.** Withdrawal of furlough scheme needs to be tapered to take account of this. Local initiatives to buy local are important. The vitality of high streets should be carefully monitored, to assess whether further policy intervention would be justified.
- **Local authority services and public facilities are reduced or halted in 2020/21** in response to overspend caused by pressure on some services and loss of income.

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Subsequent service reviews result in centralised or rationalised facilities, pulling them out of small towns and similar locations. Government must provide local authorities with sufficient additional funding during 2020/21 to fully compensate for the extra and unforeseen pressures on certain services e.g. social care, and the loss of income streams e.g. car parking. Local authority and public agency funding settlements for 2021/22 onwards should be protected, so not to make rationalisation even more likely, probably leaving rural communities (especially the most vulnerable) without access to key facilities. The Fair Funding Review must lead to real increases in support for rural councils at District, County and Unitary level to put an end to historic underfunding.

Village shops, Post Offices, Pubs and Village Halls

- **Small retail, pub and similar businesses (including community businesses) struggle to adapt** because their work involves a degree of proximity or their premises make social distancing difficult to implement. Supply chain issues continue to impact. Government should be particularly flexible how it withdraws support programmes. Retail advice services should be repurposed and expanded for the next year or so, to help village shops, pubs and the like to operate safely.
- **Village halls will have lost income, but maintenance costs must still be met.** Often the only public meeting place in smaller communities and their retention is vital to address rural isolation. Enhanced funding is needed to enable the ACRE Network to support them.

Voluntary Sector and Town/Parish Councils

- **Some VCS sector bodies contract or fold, due to lack of fund-raising opportunities and other financial pressures.** Local areas should be encouraged to find ways which make it easy to donate to local VCS bodies.
- **The volunteer effort and neighbourliness that flourished during the lockdown dissipates** quickly again. The Government's new Loneliness Fund is welcomed. The fund size could usefully be expanded if demand for it proves high.
- **Scope for local groups and initiatives to tap into the pool of younger volunteers** who helped, before it is lost. Existing approaches known to work, such as Good Neighbour Schemes, should be funded for rolling out more widely across rural areas.

Public Transport

- **There is a very real risk that (already limited) rural transport networks are pared right back.** If routes are not re-instated the young, the old and the poor will be most affected, adding to rural isolation and difficulties in accessing services. DfT should set up a time-limited emergency fund enabling local authorities to support marginal rural bus routes whilst public confidence returns.
- **Community transport services are scaled back or ceased as a result of financial pressures.** Grant eligibility criteria should be reviewed to ensure that community transport schemes can take advantage of grants being made available to businesses and charities.

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- **Increased home working could mean that fewer fare paying passengers use rural bus routes over the long term, making them less viable.** There is a longer term need to review policies and support for rural transport.

Tourism, hospitality, culture and heritage

- **Rural places whose economies are tourism-dependent (e.g. coastal resorts, National Park visitor honeypots) experience large numbers of business closures and job losses.** The rural High Street as well as village pubs and restaurants all form part of the tourism 'offer' of an area. The 2020 summer tourism season may be lost in large measure. It is the summer season which carries businesses through the winter. Government should be particularly flexible how it withdraws support programmes given the special difficulties of applying social distancing. Local Industrial Strategies and economic support programmes under the UK Shared Prosperity Fund should target the hardest hit rural places. The Coastal Community Teams initiative could also be expanded to underpin locality-led responses in places experiencing significant economic impacts.
- **Lack of future investment as businesses lose confidence.** As above. Rural economic development programmes should fund innovation and upgrade projects. Other (national) innovation funds should be rural proofed.
- **Sectors such as hospitality are very hard to operate with social distancing.** Should continue to have access to the furlough scheme set at 80% of wages to avoid large scale redundancies.
- **Consumer-facing businesses face a period with less footfall and turnover, as many household budgets tighten.** The Business Rates holiday should continue for 2020/21 as planned, with local authorities fully compensated. The position of consumer-facing businesses should be carefully monitored and kept under review, not least in rural areas, with further policy intervention if necessary.
- **The viability of some major attractions may be threatened.** DCMS should survey and monitor this sub-sector so it can identify any significant looming concerns. Government should stand ready to provide some targeted assistance to the sub-sector, if necessary, to help major attractions survive beyond the 2020/21 season.
- **Threat to future of cultural and heritage facilities** e.g. museums and theatres. The loss of income during the period of enforced closure, difficulties with social distancing, and uncertainty over future financial support may force some venues to close permanently. Arts Council England's emergency funding must reach smaller venues. Longer term, its support and that from local arts development organisations should target small venues in locations with few or no nearby alternatives, so they can revive and become more resilient.

Higher and Further Education

- **Moves to provide more education courses online.** Whilst a positive change for many rural students it is not supported in some rural areas by adequate connectivity. DCMS should prioritise and bring forward existing plans to invest in rural full fibre networks and (via the Shared Rural Network) to plug gaps in the 4G mobile network. Equipment bursaries for students from poorer families should be mandatory.

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Connectivity

- **Home working increases and becomes permanent** but is not supported in some rural areas by adequate connectivity e.g. making video-meeting calls unreliable. DCMS should prioritise and bring forward existing plans to invest in rural full fibre networks and (via the Shared Rural Network) to plug gaps in the 4G mobile network. As not all homes are suitable for home working, especially taking into account Health and Safety requirement, accessible alternative local workspaces must be provided e.g. in libraries and village halls.
- **More rural services are accessible online, as the default**, following the severe market disruption during the period of restrictions. As immediately above. Local authorities, LEPs, etc., should continue promoting digital skills and digital adoption opportunities for SMEs and individuals, with training sessions in accessible rural locations.
- **Digital inequalities are exposed by the new dependence on online access to services, expectations of home working, home schooling and virtual socialising with family and friends.** DCMS should prioritise and bring forward existing plans to invest in rural full fibre networks and (via the Shared Rural Network) to plug gaps in the 4G mobile network. A Digital Inclusion Programme should be funded, to give people of all ages the opportunity to gain necessary digital skills.

COVID-19 Infection

- **Demographics – older people, the most ‘at risk’ group, are over-represented in rural areas.** Need for readily accessible local testing services.
- **Concerns over test, track and trace.** Funding for local authorities to play a key role is welcomed as facilitating a locally responsive approach. However, poor connectivity in many rural areas will limit the usefulness of smartphones for this purpose. Asking people will not identify the unknown contacts, e.g. fellow bus travellers, and many others will be forgotten. This highlights the need for improved mobile coverage and for adequate and accessible local COVID-19 testing provision.
- **The capacity of health and care services is more limited in rural (than in urban) areas and they have been stretched by the pandemic.** Rural delivery costs must be better reflected in future funding allocations for these services.

Other Health Issues

- **Health and care services face particular recruitment and retention issues in rural areas.** Those issues have been exacerbated by the stresses that the pandemic has placed on staff in the sector. Delivery of the NHS Workforce Plan needs to include a strong rural dimension, which feeds through to action at the local level e.g. plans by Integrated Care Systems. Medical training should facilitate and financially incentivise rural placements.
- **The anxiety instilled by the pandemic places extra pressure on local mental health and counselling services.** Mental health and counselling services need to find ways to operate safely (including phone and online), where they have not already done so. Some in-year realignment of health resources may be needed to enhance the provision of such services (many of which already rely heavily on

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volunteer effort). The design and delivery of mental health services locally must be properly rural proofed, so that they are accessible to rural communities and attuned to their needs.

- **The availability and accessibility of mental health services is more limited in rural areas.** Following the pandemic, greater efforts must be made to improve rural access to mental health services.
- **Growth in alcohol and substance misuse during the pandemic and lockdown.** Local public health services must be better resourced than they have been, especially those in rural areas where resources have been tightest.
- **Telecare initiatives all depend on Broadband/Mobile Connectivity.**

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Rural Services Network

Assessment of Rural Issues and Asks for a Covid-19 Recovery Plan

Immediate overarching issues

LOCAL AUTHORITY FINANCES: authorities (in both rural and urban areas) have had to spend huge unplanned for sums to support their communities through the Covid-19 lockdown and they have lost large amounts of income. If they cannot now provide a balanced budget, they will have to cease all 'non-essential expenditure'. That will include discretionary services, support for community groups and, indeed, much of the activity responding to the lockdown. Government must urgently give re-assurance that it will make good the extra costs and lost income to avoid such a scenario.

LOCAL TEST, TRACK AND TRACE: it is vital that the approach to test, track and trace cases of the infection is led by public health authorities operating at the county level, who in turn will work in partnership with their communities. A national one-size-fits-all approach will not be sufficiently nuanced or adaptable to local circumstances. A local led approach will be more successful at identifying new cases and preventing transmission within rural communities.

Summary of key findings

Covid-19 and the lockdown which came into place to control it have resulted in a wide range of impacts for rural economies and communities. Many of these have a distinct rural dimension. It is crucial, therefore, that any Government recovery plan is properly rural proofed.

Those impacts and the prospects for recovery vary considerably between sectors, business types and locations. Social distancing measures pose a major challenge for the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. Rural places with economies heavily dependent on tourism, for which those sectors are integral, seem likely to be hardest hit. Even within the agricultural sector certain sub-sectors have been or may be much harder hit than others e.g. dairy, horticulture, fruit growing.

It is very important that support measures introduced by the Government, such as the furlough scheme, are withdrawn only gradually and flexibly. This approach will allow businesses to partially reopen and then rebuild. Support may be needed for longer (or at higher levels) for those business sectors facing the greatest challenges.

Looking beyond 2020, the economic impacts underscore the need for Local Industrial Strategies to include a strong rural dimension and for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to have a dedicated rural funding stream. That should be flexible, to meet varied local needs. It should be capable of helping areas to diversify their economies and workforces to reskill. It should support job retention as well as job creation. There will likely be a need to target assistance at many coastal and tourism-dependent rural places.

Rural town high streets also now face a significant challenge. It is uncertain how many of their businesses will survive. Some independents may not reopen, some chains may rationalise their stores. This may leave vacant premises. The rapid switch to cashless transactions could speed up bank branch closures. Policy support for town centres should be expanded and more small rural towns should be beneficiaries.

The lockdown has highlighted the inadequacy of broadband and mobile networks in many rural areas, when people work from home, school at home, use online services and socialise from home. Existing Government-industry programmes to invest in rural full fibre broadband and plug gaps in the mobile 4G network should be accelerated. Also highlighted by the lockdown is the digital divide. Everyone wishing to gain digital skills should have access to training.

The income of many rural households is likely to reduce significantly over the next year or more, not least due to job losses. Some face poverty. Local projects, accessible to rural communities, to address food poverty, fuel poverty and the like will need support from public authorities, grant giving bodies and volunteers. There is likely to be even higher demand for affordable rural housing. Homes England should establish a kick-start programme for housing associations to build more truly affordable homes in rural areas.

The older age profile of rural areas has had a notable effect, with large numbers of households self-isolating. Although local networks have generally supported this population well, there are notable longer term issues. The capacity of health and care services is more limited in rural (than in urban) areas and they have been stretched by the pandemic. Rural delivery costs must be better reflected in future funding allocations for these services. Following the pandemic, greater efforts must also now be made to improve rural access to mental health services.

There is a very real risk that (already limited) rural transport networks are pared right back, not least as passengers seek to avoid using public transport. If routes disappear the young, the old and the poor will be most affected, adding to rural isolation. Financially marginal bus routes and community transport schemes will need additional financial support available to them for a period until passenger numbers resume. Rural isolation concerns should also be addressed with enhanced funding to enable the ACRE Network to support village halls and more good neighbour schemes.

Document purpose

This document maps identified issues or impacts for England's rural communities and businesses which have been or appear to be arising as a result of the restrictions put in place since March 2020 to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. It uses these to identify some appropriate short term measures and some long term asks of Government or others for inclusion in the national Recovery Plan which will be needed.

The Rural Impact Assessment in this document took as its starting point issues identified in Ryedale District Council's Covid Impact Assessment. Further issues were then added to that. These issues have been set out below against the themes that form the structure of the RSN's emerging Revitalising Rural document (- the next stage of the RSN's call for a Rural Strategy). It is work in progress and further issues or asks may be added, not least if they are raised by RSN members and partner organisations.

Although this analysis shows that there are issues facing a wide range of sectors and businesses in rural areas, it is acknowledged that some have adapted well to the restrictions and a minority have even experienced additional demand for their services or products.

Strategic issues raised with the Government

On 6th May the Rural Coalition (of which the RSN is a member) wrote to George Eustace, Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, setting out some rural issues which should be taken into account when easing the lockdown restrictions. The following week the Government published its roadmap (*Our Plan to Rebuild: The UK Government's COVID-19 Recovery Strategy*). Key sections from the Rural Coalition letter are as follows:

"We recognise that stringent measures have had to be introduced to control the spread of the coronavirus and we welcome the steps that Government has taken to alleviate some of the adverse impacts. Communities and individuals everywhere are affected, in cities, towns and villages, but we thought it might be helpful to share with you some of the particular impacts on rural communities and where help is needed. We would urge you, as part of your rural affairs brief, to ensure that your colleagues across government take account of the rural dimension in both tackling the virus and in the mitigating measures.

"Our concerns are as follows:

- Economically, the impact on the high streets in rural towns will be severe. Many are already at risk, but in particular small, independent retailers will struggle to survive as businesses and risk losing staff. The business rates holiday will not be enough to help them through and many will be reluctant to add to their borrowing.
- The cancellation of festivals and events, such as agricultural shows, food festivals, will impact on business more widely through loss of footfall etc.
- Rural tourism and leisure businesses are often small and dependent on seasonal trade. Although it is predicted that more people will holiday in the UK this year, it is likely that this will tend towards self-catering. Many attractions are having to close. Rural arts and heritage venues are also at risk.

- In addition, the seasonal nature of rural employment and business means that income from tourism, events etc in the spring/summer months is what carries people and businesses through the winter. So, the losses this year will have significant longer-term implications.
- Working from home is not an option for many rural businesses and workers, especially those connected with the land. How will farmers manage, especially if they contract the virus.
- Many rural workers are self-employed and/or have a range of part-time jobs. They will be especially badly hit by loss of income.
- Socially, as you will appreciate only too well, the problems of social isolation and loneliness in rural areas will increase and will impact on mental health and wellbeing.
- The advice concerning the self-isolation of the over 70s, whilst understandable, will have a severe impact on rural community organisations. They are the backbone of rural networks and volunteering.
- Many rural elderly live some distance from their families and are dependent on local support. It is essential that statutory and voluntary run care services for the elderly and vulnerable people are maintained.
- The future of village shops and pubs is uncertain. The former might do quite well as people shop more locally. But they will be vulnerable to the risk of getting the virus themselves, potentially cutting off a local lifeline.
- There are signs that suppliers are prioritising larger retailers at the expense of small village shops and other outlets. This must be avoided.
- Village pubs are much more than suppliers of food and drink. They may be the shop, the post office or provide other much-needed services. If they have to close, it will have a severe effect on the village community.
- Community businesses, including many shops and pubs, are run on very low margins and are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in trade. Many are also dependent on voluntary labour.
- The ability of village halls to weather the storm is uncertain. They are already stepping into the breach and providing many services to the community e.g. drop-off/collection points for shopping and medication. But their regular sources of income are ceasing as social events, clubs and meetings are cancelled. Some are already closing and, without sufficient reserves, may not be able to open again.
- It is important that some additional support is provided to keep village halls afloat. For example, a special revenue grants scheme could be introduced and a loan repayment holiday brought in for those who have loans with the government loan fund administered by ACRE.
- It is also worth bearing in mind that online shopping and delivery from supermarkets is not always possible in rural areas, particularly remoter ones. In your discussions with supermarkets, it would be helpful if they could be flexible to take multiple orders from some locations and deliver to central points.”

Covid-19 and Restrictions: Rural Impact Analysis

The tables below form the rural impact analysis, with impacts and asks categorised according to the themes in the emerging RSN Revitalising Rural document.

Theme: Training, apprenticeships and further education (broadly interpreted as workforce-related issues)		
Rural issues or impacts	Short term asks	Longer term asks
Significant job losses and unemployment from closed and struggling businesses lead to financial hardship for many households.	<p>The withdrawal of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (or furlough scheme) should be tapered, so businesses can resume their activities and take back-on staff gradually, including on a part-time basis.</p> <p>Sectors, such as hospitality, where social distancing measures make it very hard to operate (both physically and in a financially viable way), should continue to have access to the furlough scheme set at 80% of wages to avoid large scale redundancies.</p>	Future economic development programmes for rural areas must receive a proportionate share of resources and policy interventions (under Local Industrial Strategies and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund – see below). These should be designed with reskilling, training and job retention as objectives, as well as new job creation.
There are increased levels of household and personal debt among those with a loss of income and few or no savings.	Banks/building societies, utility providers, mortgage providers and others should adhere to best practice and provide interest-free periods, given the exceptional circumstances.	As above.
Rapidly growing demand for local welfare and benefit services outstrips their capacity to administer and causes a backlog.	DWP/Jobcentres should reassign or take-on staff to manage demand. Government should maintain its extra grant funding for the Citizens Advice service throughout the year to help rural people with claims. Citizens Advice should maintain or boost its rural presence e.g. with outreach surgeries.	

Associated with the issues above, there is a growing prevalence of fuel poverty and food poverty .	Local authorities and others should be supported to help ensure appropriate levels of support are in place to help rurally-accessible foodbanks, poverty action projects, etc to meet growing local needs.	
More young people move away from rural areas after the pandemic in search of better employment opportunities.		As above. Rural economic development programmes should be encouraged to diversify economies and prioritise better quality jobs, as well as offering locally accessible training opportunities.

Themes: Access to affordable housing Land use planning system		
Rural issues or impacts	Short term asks	Longer term asks
Increase in tenancy issues and homelessness as financial hardship means that some can no longer afford their rent or mortgage.	MHCLG should provide some extra short term support, channelling funding via local housing authorities to assist those with the most urgent needs.	Housing and planning policies should be amended to support the delivery of truly affordable housing in rural areas (see below).
A reduction in household income for many means a stagnating housing market with more demand for affordable or social housing.		A Homes England managed fund should be created to kick-start investment by Housing Associations, recognising small rural site costs. Local government should be encouraged, with financial support, to make full use of its powers to bring forward new affordable homes.
Loss of investment confidence and reduced levels of house building lead to more demand for the available affordable housing stock.	Government should compensate local planning authorities for the cost of deferred CIL payments.	As above.
Developers seek to renegotiate their Section 106 planning agreements citing a reduction in site viability as justification.	Renegotiation should be resisted by local authorities, underpinned by clear MHCLG support, to protect the delivery of needed affordable housing. The temporary deferment	If CIL deferment is left in place for more than a few months, local authorities should be compensated by MHCLG with gap-funding to make good the lost income.

	of developer CIL payments should be treated as an alternative benefit.	
The unequal impact on household incomes means that the housing affordability gap worsens for low income local households.		As above.

Theme: Transport and access to jobs or opportunities		
Rural issues or impacts	Short term asks	Longer term asks
Fear of travelling on public transport results in financially unviable and lost rural bus routes.	DfT should set up a time-limited emergency fund enabling local authorities to support marginal rural bus routes whilst public confidence returns.	Longer term promotion will be needed to get rural residents and visitors back onto public and community transport, once it becomes safe to remove the social distancing restrictions.
Community transport services are scaled back or ceased as a result of financial pressures now faced by the not-for-profit sector.	Grant eligibility criteria should be reviewed to ensure that community transport schemes can take advantage of grants being made available to businesses and charities, enabling them to survive the current situation.	As above. The Community Transport Minibus Fund could be revived and expanded to help the sector bounce back.
Increased home working means that fewer fare paying passengers are using rural bus routes over the long term, making them less viable.		There is a longer term need to review policies and support for rural transport.
Rural transport infrastructure projects are cut as Government makes savings in public expenditure or refocuses on post-pandemic priorities.		DfT should reaffirm their commitment to existing rural transport infrastructure projects, as a contributor to the recovery plan.

Theme: Digital connectivity (broadband and mobile)		
Rural issues or impacts	Short term asks	Longer term asks
The extent of home working increases and becomes permanent, but is not supported in	DCMS should acknowledge that slow connectivity has been problematic during the	DCMS should prioritise and bring forward existing plans to invest in rural full fibre

some rural areas by adequate connectivity e.g. making video-meeting calls unreliable.	lockdown for many rural homeworkers, school children and others.	networks and (via the Shared Rural Network) to plug gaps in the 4G mobile network.
Digital inequalities are exposed by the new dependence on online access to services, expectations of home working, home schooling and virtual socialising with family and friends (the latter case adding to loneliness).		As above. Additionally, a Digital Inclusion Programme should be funded, to give people of all ages the opportunity to gain necessary digital skills.
Households facing a large drop in income make savings by terminating broadband or mobile contracts , thus reducing their connectivity.		Rural economic development programmes need designing for implementation from 2021 (see Local Industrial Strategies and UK Shared Prosperity Fund).
More rural services are accessible online , as the default, following the severe market disruption during the period of restrictions.		As for the asks above. Local authorities, LEs, etc should continue promoting digital skills and digital adoption opportunities for SMEs, with training sessions in accessible rural locations. Building a digital presence has been a key business adaption strategy to the restrictions.
Those online face an enhanced risk of scams from fraudsters taking advantage of the situation.	All organisations providing online services and employers with staff homeworking should flag scam risks and make clear how they will/won't contact their clients/employees.	Digital Inclusion training (see above) should include information to help users avoid cybercrime and scams.

Themes: Electricity network capacity, e-charge points and renewable energy Decarbonising rural economies and communities		
Rural issues or impacts	Short term asks	Longer term asks
Environmental and zero carbon projects become seen by some as a luxury during a deep economic recession and they are no longer progressed.	Government should reaffirm its commitment to the 2050 net zero target and should state its intention to rebuild the economy in ways that contribute to that goal.	Economic growth and other programmes should include ambitious low carbon and net zero objectives. They should address rural net zero challenges and opportunities.

Themes: Local Enterprise Partnerships and Local Industrial Strategies (broadly interpreted as business-related issues) UK Shared Prosperity Fund

Access to business advice and support		
Rural issues or impacts	Short term asks	Longer term asks
A significant number of businesses close or go into administration, after a period with no/little income and faced with future operational issues to manage social distancing.	Current support programmes for SMEs and the self-employed should be sustained whilst restrictions are in place. They should be withdrawn gradually and/or by sector to reflect the variable impacts of social distancing (see comments above about the hospitality sector). A flexible approach is needed, recognising that every business and its premises varies.	Local Industrial Strategies should have a rural strand wherever their area includes rural localities. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund should include a dedicated rural funding stream. This rural economic development programme should be flexible in scope, have locally determined priorities and be locally managed. It must be ready for launch in 2021.
Some businesses face immediate cashflow challenges and rapidly declining cash reserves.	The Government-backed business loan scheme should be sustained whilst restrictions remain in place and is likely to need retaining longer for sectors where social distancing slows their ability to reopen in a financially viable way.	
Rural places whose economies are tourism-dependent (e.g. coastal resorts, National Park visitor honeypots) may lose much of their 2020 summer season, the income from which carries them through the winter. They may experience large numbers of business closures and associated job losses.	As above. Government should be particularly flexible how it withdraws support programmes with respect to the hospitality sector, given the challenges posed to its viability by social distancing restrictions.	Local Industrial Strategies and economic support programmes under the UK Shared Prosperity Fund should target the hardest hit rural places. The Coastal Community Teams initiative could also be expanded to underpin locality-led responses in places experiencing significant economic impacts.
Businesses are unwilling to invest to modernise or innovate, having lost confidence about the economic prospects.		As above - rural economic development programmes should fund innovation and upgrade projects. Other (national) innovation funds should be rural proofed.
Businesses with growth potential are knocked back from doing so at the very time their plans are most needed.		As above - rural economic development programmes should seek to support SMEs (including social and community enterprises) with growth potential.
Consumer-facing businesses face a period with less footfall and turnover , as many household budgets tighten.	The Business Rates holiday should continue for 2020/21 as planned, with local authorities fully compensated.	The position of consumer-facing businesses should be carefully monitored and kept under

		review, not least in rural areas, with further policy intervention if necessary.
Sector supply chains are disrupted as some businesses in those chains struggle or close.		As above. There may be a need for additional locally available support for some from business advisers.
Medium sized businesses with a rateable value over £51,000 cannot access support finance they will need.	Changes that now provide full Business Rate Relief in 2020/21 for the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors are welcome. There is a gap for severely impacted businesses in other sectors.	The position for these sectors should be kept under review as 2021/22 approaches.
Major attractions may be unable to re-open for visitors or hold income generating events for some time, threatening their viability (and with knock-on consequences for their local economy).	DCMS should survey and monitor this sub-sector so it can identify any significant looming concerns.	Government should stand ready to provide some targeted assistance to the sub-sector, if necessary, to help major attractions survive beyond the 2020/21 season.
Some self-employed businesses are ineligible for the Government support schemes and so may not survive e.g. those recently set up or who operate as directors paid a dividend.	HM Treasury should consider again how it could provide support to some of these self-employed businesses. Self-employment plays a disproportionate part within rural economies.	

Theme: Rural town high streets		
Rural issues or impacts	Short term asks	Longer term asks
A significant number of high street businesses close or go into administration, after a period with no or little income and facing future operational issues to maintain social distancing. Some multiple retailers carry out cost-cutting reviews and close their stores in smaller high streets. This, in turn, affects the tourism offer in many areas.	Business Rate Relief in 2020/21 for the retail sector is welcome. As noted above, the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme should be withdrawn gradually, so businesses are not faced with a wage bill (or making redundancies) before they can resume some form of financially viable normal service.	Government should review its <i>Our Plan for the High Street</i> initiative. There is a need to reshape and expand the initiative so that more rural high streets benefit.

Hardest hit are small retail and food businesses whose work involves a degree of proximity and whose premises make social distancing difficult to implement.	As above. Town Councils, Chambers of Commerce and local partnerships should run campaigns, encouraging residents back into rural high streets, using them safely and frequenting small, independent retailers. There may even be 'buy local' opportunities.	As above. The vitality of high streets should be carefully monitored, to assess whether further policy intervention would be justified.
The cumulative impact of business closures and social distancing rules is a threat to town centre vitality and sustainability as critical mass is lost.	As above.	As above. Sizeable town centre regeneration initiatives may be justified in the worst hit places.
Further bank branches are closed and ATMs lost as people continue making cashless payments wherever possible, having got used to doing so during the period of restrictions.		The Payment Systems Regulator should revisit its earlier work and closely monitor trends, especially for people who still largely depend on cash. The Post Office network should continue promoting its service offering people access to a wide range of bank accounts.
There is a loss of cultural venues and activities , that bring many people into town centres.	As above. Government guidance and local venues need to follow safety measures which instil public confidence, so they can partially reopen.	DCMS, Arts Council England and local arts development organisations should target their support at smaller venues in locations with few or no nearby alternatives, so they do not fold.
The state of public sector finances after the pandemic leads to an inability to maintain the public realm and the physical fabric of places.		Local authority funding must be sustained at least at its current level, after a decade of austerity which led to significant service cuts, so environmental services can be maintained.
Local authority services and public facilities are reduced or halted in 2020/21 to address looming overspend caused by pressure on some services and loss of income. Subsequent service reviews result in centralised or rationalised facilities, pulling them out of small towns and similar locations.	Government must provide local authorities with sufficient additional funding during 2020/21 to fully compensate for the extra and unforeseen pressures on certain services e.g. social care, and the loss of income streams e.g. car parking.	Local authority and public agency funding settlements for 2021/22 onwards should be protected, so not to make rationalisation even more likely, probably leaving rural communities (especially the most vulnerable) without access to key facilities. The Fair Funding Review must lead to real terms increases for rural (upper and lower tier) local authorities to correct their historic underfunding.

Theme: Accessible health and care services		
Rural issues or impacts	Short term asks	Longer term asks
The anxiety instilled by the pandemic places extra pressure on local mental health and counselling services.	Mental health and counselling services need to find ways to operate safely (including phone and online), where they have not already done so. Some in-year realignment of health resources may be needed to enhance the provision of such services (many of which already rely heavily on volunteer effort).	The design and delivery of mental health services locally must be properly rural proofed, so that they are accessible to rural communities and attuned to their needs. Good rural practice in mental health service provision should be widely promoted across the sector.
Bereavements from the pandemic places extra pressure on local mental health and counselling services.	As above.	As above.
There is a growth in alcohol and substance misuse during the pandemic and lockdown.		Local public health services must be better resourced than they have been, especially those in rural areas where resources have been tightest. This will enable them to cope with demand from such public health concerns.
The diversion of health resources locally to focus on tackling Covid-19 means that other conditions and health services are disrupted.	The message must keep being reinforced that other health services are open (if operating differently).	Ways will have to be found to fast-track patients with serious health issues who have not presented during the pandemic.
Many people experience a loss of physical fitness as a consequence of the lack of access to sport and leisure activities.	Government and public authorities should encourage people to take daily informal exercise in ways that are safe e.g. walking, cycling, jogging.	See above - local public health services (including social prescribing) will need better resourcing.
Health and care services, already facing particular recruitment and retention issues in rural areas, find those issues exacerbated by the stresses that the pandemic has placed on staff in the sector.		Delivery of the NHS Workforce Plan needs to include a strong rural dimension, which feeds through to action at the local level e.g. plans by Integrated Care Systems. Medical training should facilitate rural placements and the like.

Theme: Sustaining village schools and other local assets		
Rural issues or impacts	Short term asks	Longer term asks
Some CVS sector-run facilities struggle, due to lack of fund-raising or charging opportunities e.g. village halls.	A special (time limited) revenue grants scheme should be introduced for village halls with severe issues. Those halls with Government loans should receive a repayment holiday period.	Defra should provide the ACRE Network with some additional funding, so it can grow its support to village hall trustees and committees on business planning and fund raising
Small retail, pub and similar businesses struggle to adapt because their work involves a degree of proximity or premises make social distancing difficult to implement.	Retail advice services should be repurposed and expanded for the next year or so, to help village shops, pubs and the like to operate safely.	

Theme: Role of Parish/Town Councils and community action		
Rural issues or impacts	Short term asks	Longer term asks
Some VCS sector bodies contract or fold, due to lack of fund-raising opportunities and other financial pressures.	Local areas should be encouraged to find ways which make it easy to donate to local VCS bodies whilst their normal fund-raising activities are reduced e.g. promoted on local websites, newsletters.	
The volunteer effort and neighbourliness that flourished during the lockdown dissipates quickly again.	The Government's new Loneliness Fund is welcomed. The fund size could usefully be expanded if demand for it proves high.	Scope for local groups and initiatives to tap into the pool of younger volunteers who helped, before it is lost. (Some will inevitably dissipate as people return to paid employment.) Existing approaches known to work, such as Good Neighbour Schemes, should be funded for rolling out more widely across rural areas.
Pressure on local projects (e.g. food banks) as some households face economic hardship from lost income.	As above. Local authorities, councils and others should ensure sufficient support is in place to help rurally-accessible foodbanks, poverty action projects, etc meet growing local needs.	This enhanced support for local projects may need sustaining for some period of time.

Theme: Sustainable farming and land management		
Rural issues or impacts	Short term asks	Longer term asks
Certain producers have struggled, as rapid economic change during the lockdown reduced demand for their products e.g. dairy farmers.	The grants on offer to dairy farmers are welcome. Government should monitor the situation and be ready to extent such grants if that proves necessary.	Post-CAP funding for the agricultural sector should be aligned to be sympathetic with the post-pandemic needs of the sector.
Farmers lose valuable income from their diversification businesses , many of which are in the hard-hit hospitality and retail sectors.	As above. It is important that diversification businesses continue having access to financial support whilst restrictions remain in place (especially those most impacted by social distancing measures).	Grant funding due to become available under the UK Shared Prosperity Fund needs to be open to farm diversification businesses.
Farmers that depend heavily on seasonal labour , such as horticulturalists and fruit growers, cannot access that labour (in part, if much of the migrant labour force stays away). Some crops go unharvested or are disposed of.	There is an urgent need for Government to work with the NFU, CLA and others to ensure that restrictions take full account of the need for seasonal labour this summer, whether from the UK or elsewhere.	
Cancelled rural shows and festivals impact on food, farming and other businesses which take part, losing them an important slice of their annual income and promotional opportunities. For many rural areas they are part of the tourism offer.	See above. Again, Government support schemes for the most at-risk business sectors must not be withdrawn too soon or too abruptly.	
Fishing ports (along with many food producers) are hit by a big reduction in demand, due to the closure of restaurants and fish counters in supermarkets.	The Government's emergency grant support to the sector is welcome. It may need extending and expanding if demand continues to be significantly dampened due to the restrictions.	Monitoring of the sector should ensure that demand resumes to past levels and there are not longer-term adverse impacts.

Theme: Managing an ageing rural population		
Rural issues or impacts	Short term asks	Longer term asks

<p>Anxiety about the risk associated with reduced restrictions leads some (especially vulnerable older people) to isolate themselves for longer.</p>	<p>The lockdown restrictions should be reduced in a measured and evidence-based way, which provides reassurance and build confidence. This may need measures to reflect local circumstances or future clusters of infection (if they arise). It should reflect particular concerns at those locations popular with visitors and second home owners.</p>	
<p>A 'health versus economy' narrative leads some to view older people negatively as a problem and a drain on resources.</p>	<p>Leaders at both national and local levels need to continue countering such simplistic narratives, explaining how health and the economy are linked.</p>	

Version: V2.1, 21st May 2020, BW



RSN Report for Executive on current initiatives in response to COVID-19

Background:

The worldwide pandemic resulted in the lockdown of the country on March 23rd, 2020 with people advised that they should stay at home to prevent the spread of the virus. In 'normal times', The Rural Services Network supports its members by holding a range of meetings in London, along with Regional Networking seminars and an Annual Rural Conference in September.

Current Situation:

The team proved to be very adaptable, all moving to work from home and have managed to successfully continue to provide a range of services to members ensuring the continuation of the RSN.

Clearly changes have had to be made in the way that services are delivered, and the team have risen to the challenge.

- The RSN is part of the Defra Rural Impact Stakeholder Forum, with Graham Biggs taking part in weekly meetings to contribute on the situation in rural areas.
- Regional Networking Seminars are now provided online through Zoom. The first one was held on 19th May for the North East and focused on Barriers to Access: Rural Connectivity and Transport.
- We are currently taking bookings for the next two seminars to be held online.
 - June 30th West Midlands Seminar focusing on Rural Health and Wellbeing – (as at 17.06.2020 40 bookings).
 - July 28th East Midlands Seminar focusing on Rural Skills and Education.
- We are hosting a Finance Event for Finance Officers only from Sparse authorities on June 25th, led by Adrian Jenkins from Pixel Financial. We currently have 45 bookings for this event out of 50 spaces available.
- We are making plans for our first online Rural Services APPG in July.

Whilst these events have not yet taken place, the number of bookings so far is promising and shows a high level of engagement from member organisations to attend events despite being unable to travel or attend in person. The ability to spend only 2 hours at an event rather than time taken to travel to regional events indicates a future way of working that should continue.

- Social Media – we have carried out analysis of our social media accounts to explore whether our member organisations are following us or receiving our

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information. As a result, we are targeting councils to follow us on social media and have developed a plan to programme in social media content to raise our profile.

- We have carried out a number of surveys to gather information from rural areas.
 - **Rural Communities Pulling Together**
Rural Communities have pulled together in these difficult times to support their vulnerable residents, often before the Government introduced the national volunteer scheme, communities were shopping, collecting prescriptions and telephoning residents that were shielding to help support them. We have published 10 case studies each week in the Rural Bulletin and have had over 200 responses, we are now putting together a booklet of all of these case studies to share with members. An example of the case studies is available here: <https://rsnonline.org.uk/covid-19-rural-communities-pulling-together-2>
 - **Rural Economy Surveys** – We have surveyed our members on two separate surveys on the Rural Economy, firstly on the short and long term impact of the lockdown on the Rural Economy and secondly on whether the support measures introduced by the Government are supporting the rural economy adequately. The results of these surveys are available here:
<https://rsnonline.org.uk/survey-of-rsn-members-on-the-support-available-to-the-rural-economy-in-lockdown>
<https://rsnonline.org.uk/survey-of-rsn-members-on-short-and-long-term-impact-on-the-rural-economy-of-lockdown>
 - **Domestic Abuse and Homelessness Survey** – We surveyed our members to find out if they had noticed an increase in reports of domestic abuse and how they were also supporting homeless people. The results have been shared with member organisations and were featured in our Rural Bulletin.
<https://rsnonline.org.uk/domestic-violence-and-homelessness-in-rural-areas-during-lockdown>
- Podcasts – We have explored the option of creating Podcasts for the RSN and have plans in place to record the first two in the coming weeks.

The team at RSN continue to explore different ways of working and engaging with our member organisations to ensure we can deliver a range of services.

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National Rural Conference 2020 – Rural Services Network

Issue:

Due to the Covid-19 virus and current social distancing guidance, the Rural Services Network feels that it is appropriate to cancel the Annual Rural Conference taking place at the University of Gloucestershire. It is too uncertain as to the situation in September to plan for this event.

Since we took that decision, Gloucestershire University have taken the decision to not allow any external events for the foreseeable future.

Proposal:

It is proposed to hold an alternative event online for members of the Rural Services Network during a week in September.

The event will focus on **'Reinvigorating Rural'**. Events would take place week commencing 14th September and would happen on **Monday 14th September, Wednesday 16th September** and **Friday 18th September**. Each day would have a different theme, and these would be: Rural Economy, Rural Housing and Rural Health and Wellbeing.

Format of events:

- **Plenary Sessions**

On 3 days of the week, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, there will be a 'plenary' session in the morning at 10am.

This will be a noted speaker delivering a pre-recorded presentation which we will make available to members on You Tube. Delegates can register for this event and will be sent a link to watch the presentation. We could make the presenter available for 15 mins after the presentation has finished, via You Tube for a live Q&A with delegates through the comments section.

- **Podcast**

There will be a number of podcasts pre-recorded in advance with speakers on the three specified topics. These will be made available to delegates on the day.

- **Seminar Sessions**

On each of the three afternoons, there will be a seminar session, focusing on an issue related to the theme of the day, with 2-3 speakers each presenting for 15 minutes, followed by a group discussion for the delegates on a specific topic.

This should enable some of the 'networking' associated with attending the conference. These sessions would be 'live' events hosted via Zoom.

Cost and Sponsorship:

Delegates that are members of the RSN will be able to attend the sessions for free due to the alternative nature of the event.

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We will seek sponsorship for the event, with perhaps a sponsor for each of the three days. There could be a package for sponsors which includes, an article in the bulletin in the lead up to the event, branding on all of the information sent to delegates, social media tagging during the event, and even a short interview recorded and made available that week via a podcast.

Targeting:

The National Rural Conference is an opportunity to bring our diverse membership together to discuss rural issues and opportunities. We have therefore decided against directly targeting different sessions at different sectors of our customers.

We understand the benefits of some targeting but will seek to do that outside of the Conference arrangements.

Engagement:

It is hoped that by providing an alternative event, we may engage with more of our membership than a traditional conference, for example, people who may not have been able to afford the time to attend a two day conference, may want to listen to an hour 'plenary speaker' or engage in a specific seminar tailored to their interest. Whilst we would not expect delegates to attend all events over the course of the week, we would hope to engage the majority of our members in one or two events.

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Rural Economy Opportunities Toolkit

Report for the 2nd July 2020 RSN Executive

Recommendation of the report:

That the Executive:

- i. Considers the proposed Rural Economy Opportunities Toolkit content.
- ii. Suggests any desired changes.
- iii. Tasks the Member Development and Support Manager to deliver a toolkit in partnership with the Institute of Economic Development by early September 2020.

Background

In November 2017 government launched the UK's Industrial Strategy and at the same time announced the first wave of Local Industrial Strategies – which, not surprisingly focused on urban areas, to be led by Mayoral Combined Authorities or Local Enterprise Partnerships.

A year later government announced the entire country would benefit from Local Industrial Strategies and challenged all LEPs to publish a LIS by March 2020.

It has been felt by many, including Lord Foster of Bath, Chair of the House of Lords Rural Economy Select Committee that policies are largely devised for urban and sub-urban economies, and are often inappropriate for rural England.

In September 2019, the RSN agreed to work with the Institute of Economic Development (iED) to review Local Industrial Strategies and work collaboratively to highlight economic opportunities in rural areas.

The RSN Member Development and Support Manager (due to her background in economic development) has been tasked with progressing the work with iED and as a result has suggested the production of a Rural Economy Opportunities Toolkit.

Proposed Rural Economy Opportunities Toolkit Content

It is proposed that an easily accessible and informative toolkit is produced covering the following areas:

1. Introduction and scene setting

Providing a voice for rural communities and service providers

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Stating why LIS concept is flawed and the need for all businesses to be properly supported – large and small, urban and rural, to improve national economic performance.

2. What good looks like

Providing examples of existing best practice within rural business, including company mapping, foundation economics, modern rural economies and drawing on the diversity of successful rural businesses.

3. Horizon scanning

What the future holds for digital health, clean growth, transport. Including consideration of mega trends and the World Economic Forum – Fourth Industrial Revolution concept.

4. Rural Economy Checklist

Considering essential services, broadband speeds, links to economic drivers and wealth creators, demographic trends, and adaptability. Plus, requirements for change i.e. a new future – the need for vision, acceptance and engagement.

5. Key measures

The practicalities – identifying readily available rural data and how it can be used to inform economic opportunities.

Toolkit Launch

It is envisaged that the Rural Economy Opportunities Toolkit would be completed by the end of the summer and could be launched at the RSN Conference in September 2020.

The Toolkit could also be extensively promoted via social media and by targeted e-mailings to members of the Rural Services Network; Rural Services Partnership; Rural Health Care Alliance; Rural England, iED, LEPS and MPs.

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LGA Special Interest Group Annual Report to LGA Leadership Board (19/20)

SIG Name:	Rural Services Network
Lead Member:	Councillor Cecilia Motley (Shropshire Council)
Lead Officer:	Graham Biggs MBE

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Membership

The RSN has 2 main subsidiary SIG's. **Sparse-Rural** which has 104 members which deals with our financial representational (distributional) work and the **Rural Assembly** (with 121 Members, including the SPARSE members) which deals with all the non-financial distribution issues and rural policy generally. These both meet twice a year when all members are entitled to be represented. All Sparse-Rural members are additionally members of the recently created Rural Health & Care Alliance – a Partnership between the RSN and the National Centre for Rural Health and Care.

The other LGA recognised sub - group includes the **Rural Fire and Rescue Services Group** which meets after the LGA Annual Fire Conference has 10 members. It seeks to present arguments common to County and Combined Services operating in areas that have significant rural areas.

The Rural Services Network is however much more widespread than these Special Interest Groups and further information can be found at <http://www.rsonline.org.uk/page/how-we-work>.

Our Aim

Our main aim is to act as the national champion for rural services, ensuring that people in rural areas have a strong voice. We are fighting for a fair deal for rural communities to maintain their social and economic viability for the benefit of the nation. Our work focuses on four priorities, and we also recognise Rural Vulnerability as a cross cutting issue.

- Public Sector Funding
- Barriers to Access
- Future of Rural Areas
- Health and Wellbeing

For Sparse Rural our main priority is the funding formula and working to ensure that rural areas receive fair funding to enable them to deliver their services, considering the additional costs of service delivery in rural areas.

For the Rural Assembly, our main priority will be to seek to influence Government and policy makers across a whole range of issues facing rural service providers and communities in line with the four priorities set out above.

Key Activities / Outcomes of work undertaken

The major outcome from our work this year was the continuation of Rural Services Delivery Grant to £81 million, an increase of £16million more than was originally planned in early 2019 which was £65Million.

We recognise however that this is a temporary solution and more importantly have been working hard to gather evidence for rural authorities to support the Fairer Funding Review which has been deferred but with work of course continuing to take place. We have a representative that sits on key technical working groups alongside MHCLG putting across the rural perspective. This is vital work.

As with all organisations Covid has resulted in a lot of activity having to now be conducted remotely however we have moved our seminar programme online which has been successful, and we have seen increased hits to our website over the course of the year, with a popular Rural Bulletin service published weekly to all members.

In the year 2019-20 the SPARSE-Rural and Rural Assembly collective debated amongst other issues: -

- Brexit – the impact on rural communities
- Discussions centred around the Government's response to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy.
- Rural Conference 2019
- Rural Dementia Challenges and Solutions
- The Rural Economy (including in National Park Areas)
- Closure of Rural Pubs
- Rural Bus Services
- The Time for a Rural Strategy Campaign
- Business Rate Retention Consultation
- Needs and Resources Consultation

In addition, thematic groups continue to explore the challenges facing the Economy in rural areas and Health and Social Care in rural areas.

The RSN is concerned about the lack of focus by Government on English Rural Areas. We have begun a campaign calling on Government to undertake A Rural Strategy as we leave the EU. To date we have had well attended additional meetings looking for regional perspectives and views in Taunton, Newcastle, Kendall and Chichester solely in relation to this matter and we plan further events centred around gaining the perspective from the Midlands Region.

The RSN hosted a successful conference at the University of Gloucestershire in Cheltenham in Sept 2019 which focused on "Creating Vibrant Communities". It was in association with CCRI and was sponsored by the Post Office. This event enabled the member authorities to attend and hear from expert speakers and debate key issues around rural service delivery.

We hosted seven free seminars/networking meetings for member authorities to attend at venues around England offering the opportunity for further explore and discuss key topics impacting on rural local authorities.

We provide the Secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services.

The RSN however is not just about meetings and we provide a wide range of services to our member authorities which include:

- The Rural Bulletin featuring rural news stories, rural commentary, and analysis

- Rural Observatory providing a statistical view of rural life
- Neighbourhood Planning Evidence Base for Parishes of Member Authorities
- Bulletin of Funding opportunities
- Information on Consultations impacting on rural areas

Further information about our work and services can be found at our comprehensive website on www.rsnonline.org.uk

Please return to: marion.stribling@local.gov.uk