

**Minutes of the Rural Services Network Executive held on  
Monday 20<sup>th</sup> May 2019**

Venue— 63, Bayswater Road, London.

**Present:-**

Cllr Cecilia Motley, Chair – RSN  
Cllr Jeremy Savage – South Norfolk Council  
Cllr Robert Heseltine - North Yorkshire County Council  
Cllr Peter Stevens - St Edmundsbury Borough Council  
Revd Richard Kirlew - Sherborne Deanery Rural Chaplaincy  
Anna Price, Director, Co-Founder – Rural Business Awards  
Cllr Peter Thornton – South Lakeland District Council  
Cllr Trevor Thorne- Northumberland Council

Officers: - Graham Biggs (Chief Executive); David Inman (Director)

**Apologies**

Kerry Booth – RSN  
Cllr Rob Waltham – North Lincolnshire Council  
Cllr Mark Whittington – Lincolnshire County Council  
John Birtwistle – UK Bus  
Cllr Roger Phillips – Herefordshire Council

**2. Notes of Previous Meeting 14th Jan 2019.**

Agreed as an accurate minute  
Nothing Arising

**3. Notes of Main Meetings**

Rural Assembly 8th April 2019  
Social Care and Health Group 8th April 2019

Nothing Arising

**4. Notes of RSP Partner Group Meeting and RSP Vulnerability Group Meeting 9th April 2019**

These were new meetings constituted especially for RSP organisations. They had gone well and the feedback had been good.

**5. Future Meetings**

To avoid a clash (especially in respect of the Health and Social Care meeting) with the CCN Conference it was decided the meetings planned for the 18th and (for RSP) 19th of November 2019 would be switched to the 2nd and 3rd of December respectively.

**6. Membership of the Executive and the Impact of the Election.**

(A) As a result of resignations and the Election procedures etc there was now a vacancy for the South East and East area Vice Chairs. The matter would be considered by the AGM.

(B) As Member's AGMs took place if nominations altered thus affecting those serving on the Executive Group members would be updated.

(C) Martin Collett the Chief Executive of the English Rural Housing Association was interested in joining the Executive as a Director of the RSP. His CV was circulated and he was formally voted onto the Group (subject to ratification at the RSP AGM).

(D) It was decided to write out:

(a) to all new Leaders telling them about the Group and its work

(b) to all newly elected members similarly

**7. Fair Funding Review and 75 percent Business Rate Retention.**

A verbal report was made by Graham Biggs.

There was concern that this may be delayed because of the log jam arising from Brexit. However that would present problems of its own because of the financial impact that would have in changing financial times.

It was known that in the meantime civil servants were continuing to undertake work on a changed system.

It was decided to seek to commission work from Adrian Jenkins of Pixel with a 'Where are we Now' paper. This would be particularly aimed at new members.

It was believed the Price Waterhouse report commissioned by the CCN would be out shortly. It would be shared with members of the Executive and would be presented to the Joint County APPG & Rural Fair Share Group on 10<sup>th</sup> June

The Executive wondered if Member Authorities could try to encourage their MPs to come to this event.

**8. Rural Towns.**

A report suggesting setting- up a new sectional group in the RSN (as part of the RSP structures) was presented. Members considered the report with its appendices presented to them by the Corporate Director. One of the appendices listed the c750 towns (over 3,000 in built up area population) which may be candidates for such a Group.

It was felt there was now a lack of a national voice for rural towns over significant rural issues following the 'running down' of the Market Town initiatives that had taken place over previous decades.

The Countryside Commission had undertaken work when they were current on the basis that market towns were found when the local population exceeded 2,500 people.

Obviously it would be impossible to approach all these at the one time and a tranche by tranche approach would allow for RSN to build from a base of experience.

There were perhaps three forms of rural towns identified by Defra definitions/data

- (a) Hub Towns which exceeded the normal 10,000 population of traditional Market Towns but still took on that central role
- (b) Market Towns with a built up area population of between 5 and 10 thousand people
- (c) Smaller Market Towns down to 3,000 people.

Many of these towns (if they were in the area of a member authority already as a result of that membership) received Community Group involvement giving them the Bulletin weekly service plus the opportunity for panel work and this would continue.

However for a fairly small annual involvement fee the following service was suggested:-

- (a) Formation of a dedicated RSP Rural Towns Sub-Group, offering some peer-to-peer networking and discussion opportunities (either face-to-face or online).

(The suggestion to use RSP was to avoid any possible dilution of the work of the RSN SIG work which involves principal councils)

- (b) Development of a representational role, for example responding to selected public policy consultations or meeting with interested Parliamentarians. There appears to be no rural specific or market or small towns APPG.
- (c) Development of some good practice and learning material related to the key policy areas and delivery challenges or opportunities for rural/market towns.
- (d) Provision of a dedicated (quarterly?) newsletter highlighting relevant latest policy developments, showcasing interesting member practice and flagging relevant initiatives or funding opportunities (perhaps drawn from the Rural Funding Digest).
- (e) Possibly provision of some benchmark statistics about rural/market towns.
- (f) Management of occasional online surveys of the member rural/market towns, to gather comparative information about topics of particular interest to this grouping.

It was felt the best way to establish a first tranche was to randomly pick a town each from all the rural areas listed and see how many would be interested. A mixture of the three sizes of town would be selected.

It is suggested that the annual membership fee requested is £150 for Hub Towns; £130 for Market Towns and £110 for the Smaller Market Towns (all plus VAT).

RSN would ensure that there would be two specific meetings a year of this sub group with periodic opportunities for this Sub Group in RSN to present to the Rural Services

APPG as relevant issues arise which MPs representing Rural Constituencies should be made aware of/asked to make representations to Ministers about.

**9. RSN Budget 2019/20**

Members considered the report from The Chief Executive. The position may have been marginally improved by the decision to put back a unitary Northamptonshire.

**10. Spending Review Discussions about Rural Finance based Aspirations with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and with other Rural Groups.**

RSN along with other rural representative bodies had been invited to a meeting with Liz Truss the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review. She had encouraged the organisation to put together a common case. Although with a group of organisations who represent different rural viewpoints this had proved possible and a constructive second meeting had now taken place.

The Minister had asked the Groups to come forward with specific proposal on Rural Housing and (working with the Department of Transport) on Rural Transport.

**11. Report on the Housing Survey.**

Members received for information the outcome of the survey undertaken by CCRI on behalf of Rural England on Housing Issues. The report was noted. The development of a rural panel was proving challenging.

**12. Verbal Report to the Executive on Advertisements in the Rural Bulletin.**

Members had asked that they be informed back about feedback from people over the introduction of limited advertising in 'The Bulletin'. EE had been running an advert for 2 months. The advert had been moved forward on the second month. No adverse comments had been received.

**13. Current Staffing Issues.**

(A) Secretarial Staff.

Two part-timers were leaving the Tavistock office having been offered other jobs. This gave the opportunity to seek to get a new employee involved on a five days a week rate basis. Such a position had been advertised.

(B) Possible secondment of the Policy Director for two days a week for a year.

To seek to move forward Rural England CIC (Rural Research) needed some dedicated assistance. They had been examining the options. To seek to assist Jon Turner had been offered to R.E. on a two day a week one year secondment. RSN would benefit financially.

The RE Directors were this month currently considering the position.

**14. Regional Meeting Update.**

A report was given. The Regional Meetings (including one introduced into the South East for the first time) continued to be well received and attendance had been good.

**15. Call for a Rural Strategy Campaign.**

**(a) Offer to non- members in the Predominantly Rural Classification seeking to gain their support for the Call on Government for a Rural Strategy.**

If the Call or a Rural Strategy was to be persuasive it was felt that support needed to increase. At the present time there were 18 authorities who stood outside the group whose areas were classified Predominately Rural. To run parallel with the Call a membership campaign needed to be mounted.

The Executive considered the matter and decided as follows.

(A) Those who it was considered gained no financial benefit from Sparse Rural activities would be requested to take up Rural Assembly membership at the going rate of £663 at this vital time.

(B) Those who were clearly receiving Sparse Rural Benefit and were received Rural Services Delivery Grant would be offered a special two year introduction rate involving both Sparse Rural and Rural Assembly membership at £1000 per annum for the two years.

**(b) Lords Select Committee Report on Rural Economy. Summary and Recommendations Sections had been attached.**

The Select Committee had issued a comprehensive and very persuasive report a summary of which had been circulated to the Executive. It had lived up to every expectation. A comparison survey was being undertaken to establish where the Report ran parallel with the 'Call for' backing papers and where there might be variance but undoubtedly the Select Committee Report was a tremendous boost for the Call. Undoubtedly the Select Committee work had added invaluable depth and texture to the 'Call'.

**(c) Proposed Regional Roadshows**

After an event which had taken place in Taunton The RSN, the Rural Coalition, ACRE and Plunkett were working together on further ones.. They were planned for the North (possibly one in North East and one in North West) , in the Midlands (possibly one in each of the West and East Midlands) and one in the South East. It was hoped that Calor would sponsor these.

**(d) Working with the Rural Services APPG**

The Chief Executive had discussed very fully with the Chair, Philip Dunne. He had agreed that the APPG could be used as the political springboard for this campaign. They would also take a watching brief on the Lords Report and the Government's response.

**(e) Engaging with RSN/RSP Members**

To date there were over 1,000 signatories to 'the Call'. However, the matter had not really been pushed yet (due to the May elections) and over the summer and autumn there would be need for the matter to be taken up with councils and other organisations on an individual basis if the petition was to be meaningfully employed.

Shropshire Council had (unanimously) passed a supportive motion and this could be offered as a template for similarly minded members

### **Attendance at relevant fringe events at Party Conferences was being considered**

#### **16. Any Other Business.**

##### **The 'Leading Edge Initiative'**

Cornwall was seeking to establish, largely on an officer basis, a grouping that argued for those areas that did not have a significantly sized city or large town in their area. Research with consultants had produced a swathe of such authorities across England with some approximate physical inter connection. An embryo grouping of some 20 authorities was under consideration to argue and present a case to Government in comparison to the City Region case. This group wished to ensure the work of the RSN and the CCN would not be impacted upon by the initiative and would keep both organisations updated.