

# **RURAL SERVICES NETWORK (RSN) SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION**

## **ANNUAL REPORT TO THE LGA 2015**

**SIG NAME: RURAL SERVICES NETWORK**

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### **1. MEMBERSHIP- (HISTORY AND STRUCTURE)**

The **Rural Services Network** has developed incrementally. It is a cluster grouping comprising a number of initiatives for which RSN is the organisational umbrella name. It is one of only two nationwide rural specific organisations (the other is ACRE) still operating in England. It is now also the name of the LGA Special Interest Group itself following recent constitutional changes.

[All member details can be found on our website](#)

We detail here the evolution of RSN and its resulting structure.

**SPARSE-Rural** (the original organisation and now a RSN Sub Sig) was formed in the early 1990's originally as a District Council Group under the old ADC prior to the formation of the LGA. Interestingly it was the only SIG specifically referred to in the "Prospectus" for the formation of the LGA. It deals primarily with rural finance formula arguments and best practice.

On the formation of the LGA its membership criteria was extended to cover English Counties, Districts and Unitary Councils and it has a healthy percentage of each in its membership.

This sub group now comprises some 120 local authorities paying normally £2145 per year although a higher fee operates in the case of Unitary Councils.

We have worked particularly hard in the past years through our detailed research and work with an effective All Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services and with a Parliamentary Rural Fair Shares Group formed by Graham Stuart MP the current Chair of the APPG.

The Sub Group also looks at performance, neighbourhood planning, and economic evaluation work.

In the early 2000's the Group (together with the then Commission for Rural Communities) sponsored the creation of a 'sister' organisation – **The Rural Services Partnership (RSP)** (now a not for dividend company limited by guarantee- (6960646)). The RSP has some 100 subscribing members in England from across the non local authority public services, and also from rural interest groups from across the private and voluntary sectors. The subscription is £495 per year. .

In 2014 with the cessation of the LGA's Rural Commission we set up a **Rural Assembly** to allow continued consideration of rural issues across all LGA member authorities whether or not there was potential financial benefit. This second 'Rural Assembly' Sub Sig. deals with rural 'community' interest relating to living, working and providing services to communities across Rural England. This involves in addition to SPARSE Rural members some 30 additional local authority members who receive a weekly rural e bulletin service covering both specific services and general rural topics. The subscription is £495 a year.

Both SPARSE Rural and the Rural Assembly (which corporates RSP meetings) are held 3 times a year- normally at the LGA.

The RSN has for 2015 taken over the running of the Rural Conference previously operated by the Rural Commission and this continues in the second week of September. It is now the sole annual rural conference in England. The Group also operate a minimum of four (free to members) Rural Seminars a year in regional localities.

The RSN also has a **Community Group** with extensive membership from Parish/Town Councils, Primary Schools, and local Chambers of Commerce. Membership is free to Parishes, Schools and Organisations in SPARSE-Rural/Rural Assembly member authority areas but there is a small charge where this is not the case. This group is extensive and has towards 12,000 contacts.

We also have with 6 of the former Commissioners of the former Commission for Rural Communities and representatives from some 20 other organisations with a rural interest formed a Community Interest Company (9023202) standing apart from our representational work and dealing primarily with rural research. This working company is termed '**Rural England**'. It constitutes a further body in the Rural Services Network cluster and is accountable directly to the RSN Executive.

RSN has also a further two LGA recognised Sub Groups:

The **Rural Unitaries Group** which has 11 members and seeks to evolve arguments which are common to rural unitary councils that are either identified by Government as being Predominantly Rural or having Significant Rural areas.

The **Rural Fire and Rescue Services Group** which has 12 members and seeks to present arguments common to County and Combined Services operating in areas that have significant rural areas.

## **B. TERMS OF REFERENCE.**

These will be found detailed in other areas but are of course detailed in our Constitution which can be found on the website.

## **C. KEY ACTIVITIES/OUTCOMES FROM WORK UNDERTAKEN**

Our ultimate long term objective has always remained unchanged. It is our wish to establish an extensive network to assist rural areas across England in what are clearly extremely difficult days. Step by step we wish to strengthen and widen that network to assist rural areas in these really difficult times.

We provide a range of services to the membership. These are briefly set out below:-

### **INFORMATION DISEMINATION**

The RSN circulates by email weekly news and analysis information and maintains a website [www.rsonline.org.uk](http://www.rsonline.org.uk). The weekly digests etc are

currently sent to some 25,000 people a week and we estimate, read by over 60,000 people throughout England.

We have commenced both a monthly opportunities e-leaflet and a detailed topic examination bulletins which look periodically at Rural Broadband, Fuel Poverty, Local Transport, Heart of the Village, Older People, Small Businesses, Housing Spotlight. Economic Development Spotlight and Younger People issues.

## **IMPROVEMENT AND EFFICIENCY SUPPORT**

### **Financial Representation (SPARSE Rural)**

Our primary area of work relates to arguing the case for the rural premium – the fact that serving a rural area costs more. We want government to recognise that fact across funding formulae and other financial support mechanisms. We are particularly active in this area because we are massively concerned about the impact of the ongoing public expenditure cuts on service levels over the next few years – service levels that are clearly already heavily restricted. We have carried out research with LG Futures and Pixel widening and updating work carried out by Rita Hale Associates in 2006-7 and we have been pressing Government hard on the issues identified in relation to the 2014-15 settlement and we will continue to do so with the new government

### **Performance Profiling (SPARSE Rural and Unitary)**

Comparison with other rural local authorities allows comparison and evaluation across a range of services.

### **Best Practice and Innovation**

We help to establish and spread best practice information, forming links with other experts in the delivery of services to rural areas. We are working with universities in the delivery of specific training opportunities relating to Rural Governance and Service Delivery in the most rural areas.

We do feel that with different United Kingdom national assembly's establishing differing policies in respect of rural areas information exchange between practitioners from the four nations is important and we have set up a group (- the UK Rural Policy and Practitioners Group) with the help of representatives from Cardiff University, Gloucestershire University, Queens University Belfast and the Scottish Agricultural College to allow information exchange and comparison.

It would be excellent to integrate both national organisations and local authority representatives from UK Local Authorities from across the four home nations into this grouping.

## **INFLUENCING**

### **Influencing Parliamentarians**

We helped to establish the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services to provide a unique opportunity for Parliamentarians to focus on rural services and to raise issues in both Houses of Parliament. We provide the Secretariat for this Parliamentary Group

In 2015-16 it will be having at least 5 meetings. We wish to develop two of these meetings as annual forums facilitating discussion and debate on rural and financial issues.

We are also involved with supporting the Parliamentary Rural Fair Share Group mentioned above.

### **Annual Report on State of Rural Services**

We have produced annual reports detailing the position of a range of rural services, putting service delivery under a national and local microscope. This is now the only publication seeking to capture the rural situation on a year by year basis.

### **Calls for Evidence/ Sounding Boards**

We inform Government and those advising Government about the situation appertaining to rural service delivery from the perspective of both the service provider and rural communities.

Our membership has provided a lot of the evidence cited by a number of organisations in their reports to Government and in its responses to various government consultations etc.

We have established Rural Sounding Boards at both Principal and Parish Council level and plan further expansion in relation to rural small businesses.

## **NETWORKING**

We are certain that slimmed down local government needs more and more networking opportunities. With our RSP and Community contacts we do feel we can play a strong part here and we have established new networks specialising on rural experience and expertise in the areas relating to Health, Housing, Economic Development, and Transport and with Police Commissioners Rural Crime. We hope our initiatives in these areas will become increasingly evident.

## **INFORMING**

### **Rural Economy**

In addition to the regional rural seminars, we also deliver early bird digests on opportunities, rural legislation and issues, an economic barometer service and our Rural England consultancy service.

### **Community Access and Consultation**

We work with others to share best practice and generate investigations about “village hubs”, the role of Market Towns, rural broadband and fuel poverty etc.

### **Research and Analysis**

We hope that information we collect on rural service delivery and financial profiling analysed and collated with national statistics enables our member authorities to stay ahead. The RSN Observatory is becoming of increasing importance as it widens its fields of scrutiny.

### **Rural News and Information Service**

We provide rural news as it happens – on a weekly and monthly basis through our email newsletters bulletins. And web services

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

We have working arrangements with Defra, with the National Trust, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Countryside and Community Research Institute in Gloucester and with the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Rural Housing Alliance. We hope that by close working with these organisations our overall performance and research packages can be continually improved.

We are members of the Rural Coalition and we represent rural local authorities on the Programme Monitoring Committee for the new Rural Development Programme for England and we work with the Princes Trust Rural Action Fund. We plan a series of four monthly meetings with ACRE and NALC.

## **D.KEY AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

**Our ultimate goal must be to network across all English rural areas. These are contained in over 240 English Council areas. Now that the Commission for Rural Communities has gone we are the sole organisation dealing independently with rural services in England. To achieve our desired network therefore we are dependent on support from all of those Councils. We appreciate the difficulty of the task but we are really keen to seek to undertake it.**

For SPARSE-Rural our first priority will remain the funding formulae and the impact of the massive public expenditure reductions and their impact on public services. We need to be in continual dialogue with Government in relation to this.

For the Rural Assembly our priorities will be to seek to influence Government and Policy Makers across a whole range of issues facing rural service providers and communities. We set these out in a “Rural Services Manifesto” which we launched ahead of the May election. We have also assisted in the continued operation of a Parliamentary Rural Fair Share Group which has involved over 100 MPs.

With the demise of the Regional Development Agencies and the Commission for Rural Communities we have sought to introduce a number of important initiatives over the past two years.

- Rural England (now as detailed a registered Community Interest Company in its own right).
- Service Groupings in relation to individual RSP member service areas. Housing, Health, Fire, Rural Crime, Transport Groups have all been or are being established.

Creating an array of networking opportunities back into our RSN member authorities through the links formed as very a much needed response to the austerity measures.

- A system of area forums and seminars across every rural region in England.
- A Rural Policy and Practitioners Group operating across the United Kingdom examining current rural issues and exemplifying best practice.

We will continue to seek to play a significant role in giving voice to rural issues and to provide a significant network to assist rural areas across England and the people who live and work there.

Cecilia Motley

Chairman

Graham Biggs, MBE

Chief Executive