

Notes from the Rural England Group Meeting on 11th November 2013

Present:

David Inman, Andy Dean, Brian Wilson, Jane Hart, Alison McLean, Nigel Curry, Mark Shucksmith, Dave Webb, Margaret Clarke, Janice Banks, Patrick Begg Jerry Marshall, Howard Petch

Apologies:

Michael Winter, Sue Evans

1. Chair

Alison McLean was elected as chair for this meeting.

2. Introduction to the present position

David Inman: Explained RSN's role in representing the interests of rural LAs, and rural services more generally, to Government. RSN roles in research and networking also important but would like to see these having a higher degree of separation from the representational aspects.

3. Role of the Steering Group

Discussion re constitution of steering group - ex CRC (6/7 interested parties) and reps of main rural organisations.

Maybe future Charitable status (which could open up more potential funding channels) but Community Interest Company seems most flexible/ feasible initially. A CIC had been advised by Plunkett Foundation as the most likely suitable option, given the proposed Rural England objectives and services. This would be reviewed to ensure it still held true, given the discussion about Rural England. DI to talk to Plunkett about how they set up and proceed as advised.

Nigel Curry re REE: Academic Institutes concerned about loss of evidence e.g. from CRC, RDAs, RERC. Intend to create app to assemble data. Knowledge exchange scheme. Plan to submit funding bid to Research Councils. Need to inform debate re Census changes. Iterative loop of establishing information, retaining it and making it available. Bid going in for initial year funding next Spring. REE interested in qualitative data as well as quantitative. Possibility of including big data owners such as Tesco.

4. Networking and Research

Aims: Networking; research; and influence/inform

Interest from ACRE re rural vulnerability and potential to work together. General discussion around intended impacts e.g. to improve policies. Independent monitoring is likely to be a role. Wanted to be a 'think tank' rather than just a data warehouse. Networking and influencing activities would be distinct from those by RSN: they would be to promote research messages rather than representing an interest group and its point of view. Who would use the service and what are their needs? **AD:** could be trusted independent source of

information- rounded and representative. Some discussion that findings might not correspond with particular organisations' objectives. Comments from **NC** and **MS** that research never truly neutral – at the very least research questions are selected.

Could use the Group to develop findings and recommendations from research. This could help create value-added evidence/research that aimed at having an impact. The style of findings would not be overly representational, but could present policy challenges for relevant organisations.

5. Exchange of good practice

JM capturing examples of good practice always important.

Chair- where to focus first- vulnerability service. Sounding board could be USP.

DW- FSB currently Federation don't separate their regular small business survey info into urban and rural- might be possible – discussions to be had with RSN. RSN to also capture how other groups contacts may possibly be able to be involved.

6. Needs

NC- Identified neighbourhood planning, LEP responsibility for RDPE, etc needs for local info

Debate around what is 'rural', including the extent to which natural environment figures in it. The focus of Rural England work is likely to be economic and social issues (broader than rural services), but research findings could usefully be tested with environmental interests.

RSN to draft some key aims and objectives and positioning of role and consult across group as these become documented. Also to map proposed areas of work against ideas to review how well they fit. It needs to include vehicles for dissemination and learning. Might be useful to attempt somewhat fewer services. The calls for evidence may be a priority as they are a USP, given RSN contacts. Useful to add what Rural England is not going to do.

Plus draft needs to give thought to who the main audiences are likely to be.

Action: Group members to offer an initial view about priority services/activities for Rural England.

7. Funding

Several possibilities discussed including private sponsorship, BitC and Countryside Fund. Everyone agreed to give more thought to this and email DI. DI to remind

To assist this process the Chair has proposed some notes of her own. These are included here under Appendix A. Appendix B is the meeting agenda.

8. Next meetings

3 March and 9 June

Appendix A

Role

The words on the prospectus suggest 'independent monitor'.

The discussion gave us some more flesh on these bones. That the group would be more Think Tank than warehouse/depository of data - that is to say that there would be interpretation of evidence.

The group would produce respected analysis based on sound evidence.

This could result in a challenge agenda.

We need to be clear about the impact that the work/research could have, but in general would not be involved in direct lobbying (except perhaps where there was a clear vacuum).

I am not sure that we really nailed a couple of the central issues that were raised and both will need more thinking

a) who do we expect our audiences to be? Examples of how the work may be used by others - or used to influence others would be helpful.

b) can we be any more precise about either the evidence of the need for this work or about the added value that we expect to achieve. That is to say, can we be more explicit about the effect on rural communities of NOT having a monitoring/watchdog/expert body (the demise of the CRC is quoted as the reason for needing the services, but some would argue it was not needed). I know this is difficult - but at least we should articulate our view of why it is important to do this work for the benefit of rural communities. We may need to be more explicit about this being the underpinning work for a collective voice (the advocacy/lobbying role) that can be undertaken by others.

Scope of work

My sense from the discussion is that the work needs to be wider than the traditional view of 'rural services'. That said, I think there was a feeling that environmental issues are better covered by other organisations than social and economic issues. But I am happy to be corrected on this.

Networking and knowledge exchange could be part of the role, wherever a gap is perceived.

Name

Given the discussion - I did wonder whether Rural England Service was the right name? In that I felt the ambition was to do more than just deliver research service (others can already do this). Other names that spring to mind are

Rural England Observatory

Rural England Watch

Rural England Monitoring Service (sounds a bit passive?)

Think Rural

Rural Perspectives

Anyway - we should probably re-visit to check the name once we have the description of the role and scope of the work.

AGENDA FOR THE RURAL ENGLAND MEETING

Monday 11th of November 2013. 1 p.m to 3 p.m

The Millbank Room, 8th Floor, Local Government Association, Smith Square, London

1. Introduction to the present position

Informal notes from the Group to date attached.

The Rural Services Network is an umbrella organisation comprising 115 Local Authorities (SPARSE Rural), 90 non LA organisations (Rural Services Partnership) and some 10,000 Parishes, Schools and other Local Organisations (RSN Community Group). We circulate to 22,000 e mail addresses each week and we estimate our material reaches close to 50,000 people working for or living in rural areas. Much of its work has to be representational and about networking but we wish to undertake a strong research role. We consider that this is best facilitated through a separate arm of the organisation which is steered by a separate group of individuals many of whom will be linked to other rural organisations both past and present.

2. Role of the Steering Group

Its constitution.

Our current thinking is that Rural England would be best constituted (initially at least) as a Community Interest Company. Applying for charitable or similar status is an alternative possibility but such status comes with a fair amount of regulation and our concern is that this could result certainly at this stage in perhaps a disproportionate degree of bureaucracy. Although such status is not quite as attractive to grant organisations as charitable status it does provide us with a number of potential opportunities at this stage.

A formal constitution will we feel be necessary. We intend to bring a draft to the suggested March meeting.

Its inter relationship with the RSN.

Rural England will obviously remain a part of the RSN. It is really important it does so. The RSN network built over the past years is an extensive one and gives full opportunity for consultation, testing and collaboration with the network as a whole or groups inside it. The Steering Group ultimately links to the Executive of the RSN.

Its relationship with the work programme.

The prospectus has been deliberately framed to indicate the fairly limited work that has started under RSN. From our viewpoint work equates quite simply to available resource. The

Steering Group has as we see it the pivotal role in looking at how we can expand the work being undertaken. The current individuals involved with the work areas detailed in the prospectus are Brian Wilson and Jane Hart both of whom will be attending Monday's meeting. However there is an initiative being undertaken about Rural Sounding Boards through Councillors involved in the RSN network and for information we attach a report that goes to a RSN Meeting on the 18th of November.

3. Consideration of the Ambitions for the Rural England Service. (the draft Prospectus is attached)

The draft prospectus seeks to show how we will expand existing RSN services and seek to develop new ones. Are the Steering Group happy with the ambitions we set out here. We invite the Group to comment on the 'prospectus' and have a sense of ownership with the proposals. We would also like the Group to examine the intended joint working between Rural England and the Rural Evidence Exchange initiatives. Ian Baker one of the consultants involved with REE will be attending to detail the thinking behind that initiative.

4. Discussion on the possibilities relating to Funding Opportunities.

We need to consider the position in some detail. Working alongside has its plusses and minusses. On the one hand there may be opportunities to link to some of our proposals into some of their applications on the other hand we will need to ensure that we are not blocking their path by going to the same funding bodies in similar time periods. Our inclination therefore tends, initially at least, to be towards sponsorship.

5. Possibility of approach on the possible basis of the 'Business in the Countryside' organisation

There are a number of possible approaches which we will detail. Our current thinking leans towards sponsorship support. One possible option might be to try to constitute a scheme similar to the Business in the Community one where there is a call from an eminent person is involved and we try to create a bank of business supporters. A possible letter to HRH the Prince of Wales is attached.

6. Legal status of the Group

See above in relation to constitution.

7. Any Other Business

8. Next steps

We see this group working on a rolling basis. We realise not everyone will be able to attend every meeting so we do welcome/thoughts from members as they would wish.

10. Dates for Future Meetings

(We would suggest Monday 3rd of March and Monday the 9th of June. We will try to get the Conference Room at Npower at St Pauls which we have been offered for some meetings. We wish to make sure this Group is not felt to be too akin to Local Government so perhaps a location away from the LGA is best?)

