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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.

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**Hosted: Online via Zoom**  
**Date: Monday, 28th September 2020**  
**Time: 11:15am – 2:30pm**

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#### Attendance:

Cllr Cecilia Motley (Chair)	Shropshire Council / Rural Services Network
Graham Biggs	Rural Services Network
John Birtwistle	FirstGroup plc UK Bus Division
Cllr Malcolm Brown (attended on behalf of Cllr Adam Paynter)	Cornwall Council
Kerry Booth	Rural Services Network
Martin Collett	English Rural Housing Association
Nik Harwood	Young Somerset
Cllr Robert Heseltine	North Yorkshire County Council
David Inman	Rural Services Network
Cllr Roger Phillips	Herefordshire Council
Anna Price	Rural Business Group
Cllr Mary Robinson	Eden District Council
Cllr Sue Sanderson	Cumbria County Council
Cllr Peter Stevens	West Suffolk Council
Cllr Peter Thornton	South Lakeland District Council
Nadine Trout	Rural Services Network
Cllr Mark Whittington	Lincolnshire County Council

#### Apologies:

Cllr Gill Heath	Staffordshire County Council
Cllr Adam Paynter	Cornwall Council
Cllr Jeremy Savage	South Norfolk Council
Cllr Trevor Thorne	Northumberland County Council
Cllr Rob Waltham MBE	North Lincolnshire Council

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1. **Notes from the previous RSN Executive meeting held on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2020.**  
(Attachment 1)

Agreed as a correct record.

**Matters Arising:**

- 1.1. The Devolution White Paper will be issued later in the year, or at the start of the New Year.
- 1.2. Some felt that the Fair Funding Review, which had been delayed once, would be further delayed with a 'hold over' LG settlement occurring for 21/22.
- 1.3. The Comprehensive Spending Review may now just be relating to the 1 year and not be the exercise spanning the life of the current Parliament as initially intended.
- 1.4. The Pixel study into 'remoteness' referred to in the minutes will begin shortly. Pixel will be contacting 4 or 5 authorities asking if they would like to participate and provide evidence of additional costs associated with remoteness.

2. **Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision.** (Attachments 2 & 2A)

[Please click here to view all campaign documents](#)<sup>1</sup>

The Chief Executive outlined the current situation. Apart from the Fair Funding document (which will be circulated to the RSN Executive members for approval when it becomes available) members expressed their approval both for the chapters and the campaigns approach.

There had been a strong response from RSN members and considerable involvement in the consultation from several members too. It is felt to be a substantial document but one that fully reflects member input.

Going forward to keep the document alive and current it will be important to incorporate on-going consideration of all chapters into all appropriate RSN meetings. It was recognised that keeping the document updated and current would provide a constant challenge as matters move on quickly and this needed to be a rolling plan to reflect this. A Dissemination Plan is being developed and discussions held with Lexington about media coverage. RSN Executive members would be kept updated on progress.

Members congratulated the officers and Brian Wilson on what is a truly comprehensive document. They felt it had been produced with a high standard achieved in all chapters.

**Suggestions made:**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rsonline.org.uk/revitalising-rural>

- It was felt the word 'reform' might be an appropriate term to use in some areas as opposed to the word 'change'.
- Councils need to be consulted about their views on current Government planning proposals. Their views will need to be considered when updating the Revitalising Rural document.
- National lockdown situation emphatically emphasised the need for comprehensive good standard broadband and the need for the Universal Service Obligation to be improved, including consideration of affordable connectivity.

**3. Rural/Market Town Group – Update.** (Attachment 3) Corporate Director, David Inman made a presentation showing the membership achieved to date and showing the distribution of RMTG members across RSN membership.

- 3.1.** Our initial aim has been to recruit parishes and towns with a population ranging from 3,000 to 30,000 into the Rural/Market Town Group. The larger of these towns have been identified by Defra as Rural Hub Towns. In the future it possible that ceiling figure of 30,000 will increase after the 2021 census results.
- 3.2.** We currently have 119 parishes and towns in membership. 75 are paying members, 40 are on a one-year free trial membership. The sub for membership varies in accord with community population:
- Towns with population size of 5,000 charged £110 per year.
  - Towns with population size between 5,000 and 10 000 charged £130 per year.
  - Towns with population size of 10,000 and over charged £150 per year.
- 3.3.** The initial purpose of this initiative was recruit as many members across England following the c200 rural areas that Defra have identified as rural areas of reasonable size across England. The first invites covered all these areas. Obviously as would be anticipated success has been mixed. Where a Local Council has declined, we have sought out a substitute. If that substitute has declined, we have sought a further town or parish substitute.
- 3.4.** At the last RSN Executive members requested that every RSN member has at least one RMTG member in their area. Currently this is the case in respect of about 100 of our current 123 member areas.
- 3.5.** Some of the 200 Defra rural areas have no or few market 'towns' and in those cases, we have engaged in discussion with larger parishes. The current group is made up of 87 % local councils named 'town' and 13% local councils named 'parish'.
- David noted that terminology regarding town and parish varies, and in the SE in particular the phrase local councils prefer is 'parish' despite its size, when the phrase 'town' is more likely used in other regions.
- 3.6.** During this recruitment exercise process the government has been 'hinting' at its enthusiasm for a move towards Unitary Local Government model. Time

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frame and methodology are likely to be considered in the promised Devolution White Paper, seemingly to be issued prior to the end of 2020. Although it may be that the drive to Unitary is not to be as extensive as once was recently surmised; it is likely that even the narrower Unitary system being suggested might still influence our foreseen income situation.

- 3.7.** As with all our services the role and the focus on the RMTG (and indeed local councils as a whole) will need to be revisited in the context of such relevant passages in the Devolution White Paper as we seek a widening of the RMTG's membership and scale of operation at that time. Local groups of market towns within a Region or County or Unitary Council area, where they do not exist currently, could become a possibility to look at. It is felt they would need to involve annual meetings (conducted virtually for each such grouping). In the meantime, it is clearly important to do all we reasonably can to maintain membership at the current or if possible, at an increased level.
- 3.8.** A review of the existing 'categories' of membership of the Rural/Market Town Group will be undertaken and considered at the next RSN Executive meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2020.

**4. Subs for 2020-2021.**

Members considered the position very fully and decided the increase to be recommended to the Annual General Meeting for 'inflation' would be one of 2.75% to match the pay award for local government staff to which RSN staff contracts were tied.

**5. Engagement with Member Councils and Nominated Members. (Attachment 4)**  
Report from Graham Biggs, Chief Executive.

During the previous 2<sup>nd</sup> July RSN Executive meeting, members considered and recommended the introduction of a series of supplementary individual online Zoom meetings with each RSN member authority based largely around greater focus on the nominated member role. The recommendation has been subject to the staff giving consideration as to how this would be undertaken, and the additional workload involved. The Chief Executive reported this has now been successfully done. It was agreed the system would therefore be adopted. A report would be given to the RSN AGM on 16<sup>th</sup> November outlining the system for all Local Authority members of the RSN.

**6. RSN draft response to the 'Changes to the Current Planning System' Consultation which closes on 1st October.**

The RSN draft response was approved.

- 6.1.** Members expressed real concern about Government's proposals, particularly regarding housing. It was felt that organising the RSN Discussion Event on

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the Planning White Paper for the 20<sup>th</sup> October is timely. The RSN Executive strongly held the view that affordable house renting schemes are in urgent need in rural areas. Current Government suggestions relating to quotas from development sites were very disappointing in that context.

- 6.2. It was agreed that a Special RSN Executive meeting on Housing will be arranged in November to discuss rural housing policies we should be promoting.
- 6.3. **Members noted that a future APPG is seeking to invite the Secretary of State or a Minister to a special APPG in November to discuss the planning proposals for which the date is yet to be set.**
- 6.4. **It was felt micro policy was likely to affect macro areas, and at this stage there was obviously no attempt at rural proofing policies.**

[Please click here to view RSN's draft response to the MHCLG Consultation: Changes to Planning Policy and Regulation<sup>2</sup>](#)

**7. RSN's response to the 'Planning for the Future' consultation which must be submitted by the end of October 2020.**

A specific seminar for RSN members - RSN Discussion Event on the Planning White Paper has been arranged for Tuesday, 20<sup>th</sup> October. RSN will prepare a draft response and circulate to attendees at that meeting for consideration. We will consult RSN Executive members by email on the draft response before submission.

**8. To approve the RSN response to the Treasury regarding Comprehensive Spending Review.**

This has been considered by the RSN Executive members via email. This item was added to agenda to get a formal resolution of the RSN Executive to approve the submission which had to be made by 24<sup>th</sup> September.

[Please click here to view the final submission paper sent to the Treasury<sup>3</sup>](#)  
[Please click here to view Appendix with supporting information paper<sup>4</sup>](#)

**It was formally resolved, and the document was unanimously agreed.**

**9. A Plan for Jobs: Rural Analysis.**

The analysis of the Treasury Plan for Jobs from a rural perspective was noted and endorsed by the RSN Executive.

[Please click here to view attachment on A Plan for Jobs: Rural Analysis<sup>5</sup>](#)

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<sup>2</sup> [https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/changes\\_planning\\_system\\_consultation.pdf](https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/changes_planning_system_consultation.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/FINAL\\_CSR\\_SUBMISSION\\_Aligned\\_to\\_.pdf](https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/FINAL_CSR_SUBMISSION_Aligned_to_.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/Supporting\\_Information\\_to\\_RSN\\_CS.pdf](https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/Supporting_Information_to_RSN_CS.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/Revitalising%20Rural/RR%20Final%20Docs/A\\_Plan\\_for\\_Jobs\\_Rural\\_Analysis.pdf](https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/Revitalising%20Rural/RR%20Final%20Docs/A_Plan_for_Jobs_Rural_Analysis.pdf)

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**10. Rural Economy Toolkit.**

The Rural Economy Toolkit produced by the RSN and Institute for Economic Development was noted and endorsed. This was discussed during the Rural Economy Plenary Session of the National Rural Conference 2020 and it will be put to the Rural Economy Sub-Group meeting on Monday, 12th October.

The Rural Economy Toolkit will officially be “launched” at a joint RSN/IED webinar on Monday, 19<sup>th</sup> October.

[Please click here to view the Rural Economy Toolkit](#)<sup>6</sup>

**11. National Rural Conference 2020.**

The meeting received a verbal report from Kerry Booth, Assistant Chief Executive. There had been 8 sessions in total spread over the 5 days. The conference week has been extremely successful. Nearly 400 people attended sessions held throughout the week, which is a significant increase in comparison to previous years of running the conference live. The number of officers attending the online conference has massively increased in comparison to previous attendance of the live conference.

Kerry and the staff were congratulated on the week which had been a real success.

**12. Fire meeting 2021 and engagement with Fire & Rescue Services.**

It seemed certain there would be no LGA Fire Services Annual Conference this year and therefore no opportunity to hold any physical meeting of the Rural Fire Group at the end of the Conference, as had happened in previous years.

It was decided that RSN would seek to set up a Zoom event in place of this Group Meeting which Councillor Roger Phillips would chair. RSN would work to do this during the coming months. The Chief Executive stressed the need for the group to try to present the rural angle in respect of the Fire Settlement whether this was through the existing formula arrangements or any new system being established by the Home Office.

**13. RSN Meetings & Events 2021.**

- RSN Seminar Programme 2021. (Attachment 5)
- RSN Meeting Programme 2021 and Schedule of Dates. (Attachment 6)

**13.1.** Attachments were considered. Due to the recent move to online events, seminars will now focus on topics rather than regions, and will be run online,

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<sup>6</sup> [https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/Revitalising%20Rural/RR%20Final%20Docs/Rural\\_Economy\\_Toolkit.pdf](https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/Revitalising%20Rural/RR%20Final%20Docs/Rural_Economy_Toolkit.pdf)

allowing RSN to engage all our members nationally. Each year we will run 9 seminars.

- 13.2.** In terms of forthcoming meetings there were:  
97 people currently booked for SPARSE Rural meeting;  
130 for the Rural Economy Sub-Group meeting;  
89 for the RSN Seminar: Rural Vulnerability; and  
103 for the RSN Discussion Event on the Planning White Paper
- 13.3.** Online event registrations were considerably more than usual statistics. The meeting agreed the Programme to be put to the 16<sup>th</sup> November RSN AGM for consideration.

- 14. RSN Budget Report.** (Attachment 7)  
Report was noted.

- 15. RSP Full Accounts; Appointment of Tax Accountants and Appointment of RSP Ltd Chair of Directors.** (Attachment 8)

This item involved only those who were RSP Directors and only RSP directors voted on this item.

The Directors considered the papers and accounts put before them.

**Agreed:**

Nick Harwood was proposed by Cllr Cecilia Motley, seconded by Graham Biggs as the RSP Chair for 20/21. Motion carried.

Tax Assist were proposed to continue as RSP Tax Accountants for 2020/21. Motion carried.

- 16. Any Other Business.**

- 16.1. All Party Parliamentary Group Business**

**Graham Biggs outlined future events:**

- **APPG for Rural Services meeting – 3:30pm-4:15pm, 13th October 2020**

Featuring Rt Hon Stephen Barclay MP, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

- **APPG for Rural Services meeting – 11am-12:30pm, 28th October 2020.**

On how to level-up digital connectivity for rural communities with Matt Warman MP, Minister for Digital Infrastructure and Gareth Elliott, Head of Policy and Communications at Mobile UK.

- 16.2. The Chief Executive reported that English Rural HA, CPRE and RSN had commissioned a study into the economic and fiscal case for the Government investing in affordable rural housing.** Cost to the RSN £2000. As the Chief Executive of English Rural HA, Martin Collett declared an interest in this matter.

- 16.3.** Martin Collett asked how the staff were coping in these days of pandemic and working from home. He wished it to be recorded that if it were felt there was

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anything the Executive could do to assist their welfare the Executive would be delighted to try to assist them.

The next RSN Executive meeting date is Monday, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

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