RSN Seminar: Rural Planning

Date: 30th March 2022
Subject: Rural Planning
Chair: Kerry Booth, Deputy Chief Executive, Rural Services Network
Host: Online Event via Zoom

Speakers

Speaker 1: Neil Homer, Director, O'Neill Homer
Speaker 2: Gareth Elliott, Director of Policy and Communications, Mobile UK

Learning Outcomes

Examples of Good Practice/Reports/Information

- Challenges for rural planning include a larger proportion of over 65's and a decrease in those aged 30-39 in predominantly rural areas, higher average house prices, with less social rented housing available, low wages with most rural businesses unrelated to agriculture, forestry or fishing. Travel infrastructure in need of an overhaul to reduce reliance on private vehicles, digital connectivity still has significant issues and homes are typically less energy efficient.
- Rural Design Centre bringing together communities, businesses, researchers and public authorities to tackle rural challenges. https://www.ruraldesigncentre.com/.
- Major outcome from neighbourhood planning is that it has allowed local people to designate "local green spaces" of importance to them with protection equivalent to Green Belt. See CPRE report published in February 2022.
- Cost of a Neighbourhood Plan can be met through a grant: Grant funding criteria next round available until March 2023. Advise spending or committing the support and the grants by the end of next financial year.
- Information on Neighbourhood Plans, support and how to get started etc from Locality.

Key Learning Points

Neighbourhood Planning: Leading the Revival of Rural Planning

- Over 10 years, supported 180 Neighbourhood Plan projects in 51 LPA areas.
- Projects range from market towns to parishes with a number of distinct villages, 3-5 villages in the same parish, to smaller parishes based on a single village etc.
- Local communities managing the "trade-offs" whilst dealing with the breadth of common issues rather than the planning authority or developer.
- Neighbourhood planning has enabled a level of community engagement in the planning system which has been a real "game-changer" and led to a much greater understanding for rural communities of planning and how difficult it is to do.

Providing a voice for rural communities and service providers

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- Bolsters community identity and levels of engagement in referendums exceeds local and general elections.
- Tangible Outcomes include: a confident parish council that wanted to protect the village school, enhance footfall to local shop and increase numbers at village school whilst protecting the village from speculative bigger developments on outskirts – majority of residents agreed.
- A village actively setting design and development principles onto degraded land rather than wait for planning proposals etc to come in first.
- A small village being positive in its neighbourhood plan but by only allowing a very small development area which enables it to control the type of development and ensure it's in the right place for the village.
- Protecting local heritage assets (may not warrant listing) helps to bolster identity.
- Promote active travel networks between cycling, walking and bus routes and reducing use of private cars in centre of village.
- Protect open spaces "local green spaces".
- Improve local infrastructure and resolve it – large village identified land for development of 400-500 new homes to have a relief road - "bottom-up" development.
- Neighbourhood Plan (NP) reviews are not mandatory but as the policy context changes so they should be updated, particularly if the Local Plan has been reviewed. The community will then need to do a proper and full review of their plan and come up with new development proposals. If there are "minor" amendments to the NP then no need to hold a referendum.

Planning for Digital Connectivity: How Planning Impacts the Rollout of Mobile Infrastructure?

- Mobile UK is the trade body for the four main mobile operators: Three, EE, Vodafone and O2.
- Importance and benefits of rural connectivity particularly since the pandemic as more people worked from home, remote access to GP appointments, online education – school and university level, applying for jobs and job interviews.
- A mobile phone is no longer seen as a luxury but part of critical national infrastructure.
- Drone technology - potential to order prescriptions on mobile phones and delivery by drones, use of drones in farming to analyse soil for more specific crop growing/reduce use of fertiliser etc.
- Move towards Manufacturing 2.0 – not just mobile phones connected to a mobile network but to machines connected to a mobile network.
- Opportunities for fixed wireless access – essentially is broadband through your mobile. With the move into better 4G, and even 5G, potentially get near gigabit capability through a SIM card accessible router – no need for cables.
- Rural connectivity is critically important for the next phase of sensor technology which will help with climate change mitigation, and also to make places viable, investable and attractive for work and homes.

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- 4G coverage to 95% of homes by at least one operator, through the [Shared Rural Network](#), which will be completed by 2024.
- Generally, higher the mast equals less infrastructure, planning barriers in AONBs and National Parks mean lower masts and more infrastructure. In rural areas, it can be economically more expensive to put in masts where demand is low, there are topography issues, and difficulty accessing sites, maintenance issues etc as compared to urban areas.
- Working with local authorities to put infrastructure on their public assets to support mobile connectivity. In Scotland this is the [Infralink](#) with critical data on it. Government looking to replicate this in England: [Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator Programme.](#)
- Problem in planning but also in policy is the lack of priority for mobile in development plans. If it is mentioned focus is on fixed only.
- [Encouraging Digital champions](#) to be financed by Central Government to support local authorities. Where an authority has a Digital champion, they are more likely to promote/improve connectivity as a priority. Ideally need both political and officer level but a stand-alone role and at a senior level.
- Misinformation regarding [5G and health](#) and conspiracy theories - cannot distribute mobile, biological matter through mobile signals, and radiation levels for 5G are lower than that of wi-fi which most people have in their homes.
- [Cluttons](#) partnered with YouGov to survey MPs and councillors about the Government's gigabit rollout plans and the challenges involved in meeting the national targets. In addition, they surveyed businesses and consumers to gain insight into the level of understanding around gigabit capable technology and awareness of the benefits that gigabit connections can bring.
- Government's [Wireless Infrastructure Strategy](#) review is currently under way.
- Expecting Permitted Development Right reforms to allow multiple users onto one mast.
- [Product Security Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill (PSTI)](#) – includes reform to the Electronic Communications Code.

Open Forum Discussion

- Power outages: Back up infrastructure in place to counteract this in masts but where there are storms that take out the national grid, then we need a backup for the grid.
- Concern that local planning departments will be overruled by Government on developments such as solar farms with the trade-off of national interest in renewable energy.
- Planning issues for some very rural communities in National Park areas wishing to remain self-sustaining by allowing some development but constrained by the Park's own planning policy and its worry about setting a precedent. NP is the best route for collecting evidence to support case and for engaging with a statutory body (the Park) which has a duty to help. Engaging consultants can help with the professional/ technical process required. The process isn't easy. it takes time, you need people to help and to engage with the community

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- [BT pausing our Digital Voice Plans](#) for Consumers, while we work on a more resilient rollout.
- Issues with BT costings for supplying broadband to a handful of homes on a fixed line. Benefit of Shared Rural Network is that if the planning permissions are in place for the masts/infrastructure etc and the capacity is there then they can provide fixed wireless access which is broadband via mobile (all you need is a router and a SIM card).
- Mobile is much more about the [Internet of Things](#): machine to machines, mobile masts, routers in homes via SIM card, not just your mobile phone.
- Although grant funding for NPs is only until March 2023, a lot can be achieved in 12 months and there is an expectation that the Government will continue funding them in some way for the next few years, especially as they have been successful.
- [28.03.22 – Government announcement on NPs](#) – will be retained in the new system, building on the record of more than 2,800 community groups who have begun the Neighbourhood Planning process since 2012.

Any Other Key Outcomes from the Seminar

[RSN's Revitalising Rural Campaign](#) **Specific Policy Asks** of the Government is for fairer distribution of national resources to rural areas and more nuanced national policies. There are 14 Chapters in the campaign.

As new Government strategies are announced, RSN puts them through a "[Rural Lens Review](#)" which adds depth and texture to the Policy Asks. A fresh crosscut of the Revitalising document being worked on will look in more depth at younger people. It will also look at the impact of various issues on younger people and develop case studies (personal experiences) rather than dry policy discussions. Reviews include: [Levelling Up White Paper](#), [Shared Prosperity Fund](#), [Net Zero Strategy](#), [Heat and Buildings Strategy](#) and [Build Back Better High Streets](#)

[Case Studies](#): If you've got a great case study highlighting some of the issues within the seminar, or where a project has been successful, we'd love for you to share them with us. Please complete the downloadable form in the link and email it through to us to help inform our Revitalising Rural Campaign but to also highlight to Government the impact of policy decision making.

Who are the Rural Services Network? [Please click here to find out](#).

Analysis and Commentary pieces for Rural Services Network written by Jessica Sellick, Researcher at Rose Regeneration: [Finding a place to call "Home": What more can be done to plug the rural housing gap?](#) And [From Survival to Revival: How can we regenerate our high streets?](#)

Housing Insights, produced by the RSN, provides important markers as to the state of the economy for our member authorities. It explores a wide range of subjects, setting out data and statistics at Local Authority level allowing comparisons to be made with other rural areas. Please click here to access Housing Insights.

Useful links to share

- Rural Services Network's Development Management – Planning Analysis
- RSN responding to Government's call for reviews – Landscapes Review

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