

## AI Generated Notes

### RSN Seminar: Rural Communities, 26 March 2025

#### Summary

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive at the Rural Services Network chaired the meeting and started the session with an overview presentation on rural communities. The meeting went on to cover work supporting rural youth and creative industries, as well as the challenges and opportunities presented by local government reorganisation in rural England. The participants explored the impact of devolution on rural communities, including the creation of new strategic authorities and unitary councils, and the role of parish and town councils in representing rural interests. The discussion also covered funding initiatives for rural areas, the importance of community engagement, and the need to address rural-specific issues in policy development and service delivery.

#### Rural Media's Digital Content Creation

Nic Millington, Chief Executive and Grant Black, Creative Director at Rural Media, presented on their work and stated they are a charity working with over 500 young people aged 14-25 annually, and are developing digital content creation training programmes to support rural youth and the creative industries. They have created a commercial arm called Rural Studios to produce content for national and international audiences, with profits going back to the charity. The organisation is running a project called Point of View, which enables young people to share their experiences and produce stories that are then shared with local decision-makers. A case study in Ledbury resulted in the creation of a Joint Youth Council and increased community engagement with young people's concerns. Rural Media is now planning to scale this project nationally to amplify rural youth voices and inform national rural policy development.

#### Engaging Young People in Decision-Making

Nick and Grant discussed their project, which involves engaging with young people and organisations to understand their needs and concerns. They shared examples of successful collaborations and expressed interest in co-hosting regional events. They also addressed a question about how young people's feedback influences decision-making. They also discussed their outreach methods and the importance of engaging with schools and youth organisations.

#### Rural Civil Society and Devolution

Jeremy Leggett, Policy Advisor at ACRE (Action for Communities in Rural England) presented on devolution and local communities. He explained that ACRE is a rural development charity and discussed the differences between rural and urban civil society. Jeremy highlighted the unique characteristics of rural areas, such as the presence of parish and town councils, community-owned assets, and a different approach to volunteering. He also touched on the government's devolution and local government reorganisation programme, which is causing some political tension in rural England. The participants acknowledged the complexity of the issue and agreed to focus on devolution to new strategic authorities and the reconfiguration of councils into unitary authorities.

#### Rural England's Local Government Reorganisation

The meeting discussed the ongoing process of local government reorganisation in rural parts of England. The current 21 two-tier counties are expected to be replaced by around 19 to 22 new strategic authorities, each with a population of about 1.5 million. These strategic authorities will have new competencies, including transport and local infrastructure skills, housing and strategic planning, economic development, environment, climate change, and public service reform. The meeting also touched on the role of parish and town councils in representing rural areas to the new unitary and strategic authorities. The discussion concluded with the need for civil society to supplement the role of parish and town councils in representing rural interests.

#### Local Government Reorganisation Challenges

Jeremy discussed the complexities of local government reorganisation in England, highlighting that calculations for new authorities differ across regions based on factors like council tax rates and political considerations. He noted that party politics may be playing too large a role in these decisions. Jeremy also raised concerns about potential "donut authorities" where urban centres are separated from surrounding rural areas. He suggested that the creation of new strategic authorities in rural England, combined with the government's support for bus franchising, could present an opportunity to improve rural public transport. The discussion then touched on the challenges of implementing these changes, including the workload for new unitary councils and the issue of "Devo Islands" - areas that don't naturally fit into the new structures.

### **Rural England Prosperity Fund Update**

Henry Clifford, Rural Economy Team Leader at Defra, provided an update on the Rural England Prosperity Fund. The fund, which supports rural businesses and community infrastructure, will continue for another year with an additional £33 million in funding. The allocations to individual authorities will be published shortly and will remain consistent with the existing methodology. The fund's future is subject to broader spending review assessments. An ongoing evaluation of the fund is being conducted by Ipsos, and local authorities are encouraged to participate in the survey, interviews, and case studies to provide feedback and insights for future rural growth funding.

### **Rural England Prosperity Fund Challenges**

Henry discussed the REPF scheme, acknowledging capacity issues for smaller rural authorities and the need for revenue funding. He mentioned the UK Shared Prosperity Fund's faster communication and the challenges Defra faces in moving the REPF along. He also clarified that the REPF does not require match funding, and that additional funding has been announced.

### **Rural Communities' Identity and Voice Challenges**

The discussion revolved around the challenges of rural communities maintaining their identity and voice within larger authorities. The participants acknowledged the need for rural areas to have a strong identity and voice, especially in the context of urban sprawl. They also discussed the potential political infighting between different options and the importance of ensuring that rural communities' needs are recognised by policy areas. The participants agreed that the arguments for reconfiguring unitary authorities and strategic authorities are different, with the former focusing on service delivery and the latter on strategic level decisions. They also highlighted the need for rural areas to have a genuine identity with the whole of the region and the importance of embedding a major urban area that can anchor a strong bus franchise service. The participants acknowledged the challenges of delivering services in rural areas and the need for a nuanced discussion to get important points across the government. They also discussed the potential savings in staff that may not materialise when forming a unitary council and the importance of representing rural areas accurately and in more detail.

### **Rural Challenges and Opportunities**

The meeting focused on the challenges and opportunities in rural areas, particularly in relation to government policies and local government reorganisation. The participants discussed the need to address the perception that rural areas are affluent and the importance of highlighting the issues faced by vulnerable people in these areas. They also touched on the potential impact of unitary authorities on rural communities and the need for dynamic investment in younger generations. The conversation ended with a discussion on the opportunities for rural transport and the potential for better design and coordination of services.

### **Local Government Reorganisation and Community Development**

The discussion covered several aspects of local government reorganisation and its impact on rural communities. Kerry highlighted the varying capacities of town and parish councils across the country, with some taking on more services. Councillor Thornton from Westmorland and Furness noted that the number of councillors in a unitary authority can be influenced during the reorganisation process. The conversation then shifted to community development, emphasising the importance of creating vibrant communities alongside new housing developments. Jeremy suggested that town and parish councils can play a crucial role in neighbourhood development plans, while Nick emphasised the need to include children and young people in infrastructure planning. Kerry stressed the importance of effective engagement with communities, particularly young people, to understand their needs. Councillor Thornton pointed out that unitary authorities bring housing and highways under one roof, potentially improving coordination. The discussion concluded with mentions of upcoming initiatives, including a Defra rural task force and a future RSN seminar on the Rural Economy.