

Meeting summary for RSN Seminar: Rural Economy (30/04/2025)

Summary

Rural Economy Challenges and Solutions

The meeting focused on the rural economy and the challenges it faces. The attendees discussed the need to change the narrative around rural areas, emphasizing their potential contributions to the economy. They also highlighted the importance of rural areas in achieving government missions and the need for targeted action. The meeting also touched on the lack of funding in rural areas and the difficulties faced by rural councils.

Rural Plan for Connectivity and Prosperity

Kerry discussed the need for a rural-specific plan to address the unique challenges faced by rural areas, such as connectivity issues, lack of affordable housing, and access to transport and services. She highlighted the unfair funding distribution between urban and rural councils, with urban councils receiving 40% more per head than rural councils. Kerry also emphasized the importance of using the right metrics and measures to understand the challenges in rural areas and the potential of the rural economy to contribute to national prosperity. She mentioned a report that found with the right investment, rural areas could add £19 billion to the Treasury.

Melton Borough Council's Stockyard Development

Lydia Rusling from Melton Borough Council presented on their work to support the rural economy. She focused on two areas: the Stockyard, a multimillion-pound development, and community projects. The Stockyard aims to support the town centre, increase visitor opportunities, and develop the food and drink industry. Lydia highlighted challenges faced, including changes in administration and delayed projects due to cost increases. The Stockyard is expected to be completed by 2026. She also discussed how they utilised UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England funding. The presentation mentioned the work on food hubs and health checks. Lydia highlighted the importance of working collaboratively with local communities, businesses, and stakeholders to support independence and resilience in rural communities. Lydia also emphasised the need to collectively make the case for funding and investment into rural communities. The councillors were found to be very connected to their local community and supportive of the projects. However, there was still work to be done in engaging with the farming community.

UK Industrial Strategy and Rural Economy

Alex Howell, an LGA policy advisor presented on the UK Industrial Strategy and the potential for rural areas. Alex welcomed the development of a national industrial strategy, emphasising the importance of recognising the role of local growth and devolution in addressing local inequalities. He highlighted the significant productivity gap between coastal and rural areas and the potential benefits of matching the median growth rate. The challenges faced by rural areas, including a lack of premises, brain drain, and infrastructure issues, were mentioned and suggested that the

industrial strategy should address these issues. The advisor emphasised the importance of enabling councils in rural and semi-rural areas to best deliver for their communities and the need for a long-term flexible growth funding settlement.

Local Growth Plans and Rural Development

Alex discussed the importance of local growth plans and the need for action now, rather than waiting for devolution. He highlighted the challenges of maintaining core services during local government reorganisation and the need for a place-based approach. Alex also mentioned the LGA's research on the importance of all economic geographies, including rural areas, in achieving growth.

Rural Pubs' Social Value and Challenges

John Longdon, the CEO of Pub is the Hub, spoke about the organisation's mission to provide independent specialist advice to publicans and their communities, encouraging pubs to diversify and provide local services to combat loneliness. The meeting discussed the impact of community projects, particularly in rural areas, on social value and economic benefits. The speaker highlighted that for every pound invested in a project, it leverages around £8-£9 of social value, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The focus was on rural pubs, which are mostly small private businesses, and the challenges they face. The speaker emphasised the importance of measuring social value and the need for government support. They also mentioned the success of their projects in the Southwest, East Anglia, and Wales, but noted that they currently have to restrict over 40 projects due to funding constraints.

Pubs' Role in Community and UN Goals

John emphasised the importance of local pubs to their communities, highlighting their role in addressing loneliness and providing essential services. He also discussed the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, noting that pubs contribute to these goals by fostering well-being, promoting economic growth, and reducing inequality. John encouraged the audience to consider pubs as hubs for local services and to utilise the resources available at pubsisthehub.org.uk. Kerry agreed to follow up on the social value engine to feature at a future session.

Pubs' Role in Rural Economies

Kerry and John discussed the importance of pubs in rural communities, highlighting their role as convening places for sharing ideas and fostering activity. They emphasised the need for pubs to be viable businesses and John mentioned challenges with community ownership if the pub isn't viable. A delegate raised the issue of community asset transfers and the potential for pubs to serve as multi-service outlets. The team agreed on the importance of pubs in rural economies and the need for viable businesses.

Rural Economy Challenges and Opportunities

The meeting focused on the challenges and opportunities of rural economies, particularly in the context of the UK's rural areas. The participants discussed the importance of maintaining vibrancy in communities, the need for rural-proofing in government policies, and the impact of the withdrawal of banks from high streets on rural economies. They also touched on the issue of cash availability in rural areas, the need for affordable housing, and the potential of devolution to address rural challenges. The conversation ended with a discussion on the importance of data sources and the need for a holistic approach to rural development.