

RSN North East Regional Meeting: 28 June 2019

Present

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| Cllr Mary Robinson, Chair | Eden District Council |
| Cllr Allan Blakemore | Sedgefield Town Council |
| Esther Ashby | City of Durham Parish Council |
| Cllr Tanya Tucker | Durham County Council |
| Cllr Charlene Huntley | East Hedleyhope Parish Council |
| Cllr Andrea Patterson | Durham County Council |
| Cllr Jude Considine | Durham County Council |
| Neil Quinn, Community Regeneration Officer | Northumberland Council |
| Gemma Bone Dodds, Rural Economy Lead | Gateshead Council |
| Audrey Christie, Executive Officer | County Durham Association of Local Councils |
| Cllr Katherine Hierons | Spennymoor Town Council |
| Cllr Trevor Thorne | Northumberland Council |
| Cllr Eileen Armstrong | Northumberland Council |
| Cllr Richard Dodd | Northumberland Council |
| Cllr James Graham | Sildon Town Council |
| Andrea Hines, Policy Manager (Economic Growth) | Allerdale Borough Council |
| Cllr Bill Kellett | Durham County Council |
| Andy Dean, | RSN |
| Ivan Annibal | Rose Regeneration |
| Speakers: | |
| Troy Gardner | National Federation of Sub-Postmasters |
| Jo Laverick | Durham Community Action |
| Lucy Jenkins | Ushaw College |

Introduction

Mary Robinson welcomed everyone, setting out the context for the meeting and the benefits of RSN in relation to financial and other outcomes.

Andy Dean, Assistant Director RSN

Andy set out the background to the operation of RSN and its services. In particular Andy highlighted the following:

1. The RSN campaign, backed by many national and local organisations and individuals, calling on the government to create a comprehensive rural strategy. More information is available via this [link](#). A series of regional conferences to inform the campaign are being organised with the first taking place in the North East at the Discovery Museum in Newcastle on 11 July 2019.

2. Booking is open for the RSN annual Rural Conference with a great array of speakers lined up, including chair of the House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy, Lord Foster of Bath. The conference takes place in Cheltenham on 3 and 4 September 2019. Booking is available via this [link](#).

Troy Gardner – National Federation of Sub-Postmasters

Troy gave an overview of the support provided by the Federation to Post Office sub-postmasters across the country, using specific examples to illustrate the significant impact on the success of individual businesses.

A Community Fund is available to sub-postmasters of around £3500 per branch.

The Federation works with individual sub-postmasters taking a detailed look at what they sell (and what they don't sell) and producing proposals for refurbishment and reorganisation with the sub-postmasters. An Action Plan is developed which includes a local produce policy and all the assistance provided is very practical and targeted at providing more of what the customer wants and, therefore, increasing turnover. This is based on the Federation's strong understanding of the retail market – for instance, did you know that in convenience stores, 85% of the alcohol purchased is consumed within 1 hour.

In the first example used, as a result of the changes implemented through the Action Plan, turnover increased by 228% without any marketing taking place.

Over 900 retail support requests have been received over 2 years to date that this service has been available to sub-postmasters. The service is free of charge and all members present agreed that the impact described was clearly significant.

Anyone interested in finding out more can contact Troy direct:

Email: troygardner@gmail.com

Tel: 07875091747

Jo Laverick, Durham Community Action

Durham Community Action (DCA) are the ACRE Network member for County Durham. DCA provide a rural voice for Durham and infrastructure support for voluntary and community organisations across the county.

Durham has a population of 526,000 population and covers an area of 800 square miles. 90% of the county is classified as rural.

Jo outlined current work and strategic developments in Durham including preparation of a vision for 2035 by the Durham Partnership.

Partnership working is very strong in the county with a range of active programmes including: a 'Share & Learn Group' for community buildings; Durham Food; the Durham Environment Thematic Partnership; business support liaison; health alliances; and the Cree Network (a local take on the popular 'Men in Sheds' initiative).

Key issues identified by Jo included:

- The need for 'Rural Proofing' to be more prominent in policy and decision making
- The need to actively pursue greater local devolution of policy-making and funding

Lucy Jenkins – Ushaw College

Lucy outlined the long history of Ushaw College which dates back to 1808 when it was established by scholars from the English College, Douai, who had fled France after the French Revolution and was the principal Roman Catholic seminary for the training of Catholic priests in the north of England. Ushaw College was affiliated with the University of Durham from 1968 and was closed in 2011. The buildings and grounds are now maintained by a charitable trust.

The College sits in 500 acres of farmland and has many historically significant artifacts, art and buildings.

The College is undergoing a major transformation becoming a centre for historic visits and tours, music and other performances, exhibitions, serviced offices for business and many other activities. You can read more on the College website via this [link](#).

Since opening its doors to the public, the College achieved 7000 visitors in its first year. This had risen to 43000 in 2018 with opening hours increasing further to 6 days per week in 2019.

Key challenges going forward are a continuing fundraising effort (the College is currently heading towards a break-even position), increasing access to the historic buildings of Ushaw and its many collections, and resolving significant fabric issues with parts of the building. A 'Resilient Heritage' grant has been awarded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund to help achieve the ambitions of the College.

In addition, a number of other activities continue to be developed in the surrounding area including an art installation in 2016 called 'Waterfall' which attracted over 2000 participants over 6 nights in rural Teesdale with 50% coming from the local area and 14% from outside the North East. A new art installation entitled 'Hush' will be installed from 19 July to 4 August 2019. Further details are available via this [link](#).

Issues raised through discussion

Specific points raised in relation to the presentations included the following:

- Attendees were very keen to promote the services offered by the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters.
- It was agreed that a similar service available to other retailers would be of real benefit to small independent businesses. This could be a key message to send to Local Enterprise Partnerships as they develop their Local Industrial Strategies.
- Gateshead Council is organising an event with the Plunkett Foundation who provide support to community shops and pubs looking at the potential of local retailing. This event will be open for all.
- The significant costs associated with renovation and ongoing management of the historic buildings at Ushaw College were acknowledged. This is reflected in many buildings across rural areas. Upkeep, conversion and re-use are key issues.

- The role of planning authorities was discussed in facilitating the viable maintenance of older buildings. It was noted that Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans offer an opportunity to work together on such issues.
- It was agreed that a future meeting could usefully focus on the role of regulatory bodies in working with rural communities and local businesses on these issues.

Current local issues discussed included the following:

- Many examples of successful local action were discussed including at the examining village of Binchester where a community centre has been turned into a village hall, putting services in place that were not previously there. This was suggested as a good example of the power of local people being supported in the right way.
- A general lack of services and facilities for teens and pre-teens was noted in some locations, although some good examples were also mentioned. It was noted that numbers is often the key issue – there are not enough people of the same age left in some communities. Any advice and support on encouraging how to do more for these age groups would be welcome. Jo Laverick offered to discuss this with those attendees who identified the issue.
- The general issue of scale for rural areas was noted. Often, numbers of people requiring specific services or facilities are seen as insufficient to justify provision.
- Support for social enterprise development was recognised as very important to enable small ideas to turn into dynamic activities and organisations.
- The issue of 10-14-year olds in larger communities was identified often ‘hanging out’ in larger numbers. Well organised solutions would be very welcome.
- Transport to services for younger people was identified as a key issue, particularly for those parents who are unable to get their children to the services and opportunities which may be available in larger communities.

Durham County Council were thanked for hosting the meeting and all members for their attendance and positive contributions.