

Summing Up

Last month the Rural Services Network formally launched its call for the Government to produce a comprehensive strategy for rural areas. The RSN may be the only organisation whose sole objective is to champion the needs and rights of people who, whether by accident or necessity, live in rural areas but it is not a lone voice in the wilderness.

As we have heard, others do recognise the need. Stephen Conway, Bishop of Ely, is the Church of England's lead bishop for education and has called for an overarching rural strategy for the issues facing our countryside communities, including the challenges of providing good education for children in more isolated parts of the country. He has said that all these issues must be seen together and the Church is committed to working with the Government to achieve this. David Inman mentioned the vital role that the church can play, especially where it is the only organisation remaining in many rural villages.

The House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy has now highlighted the need for a new agenda for the countryside, similar to the government's industrial strategy. Its report, published two days ago, highlighted the significant opportunities and challenges facing rural communities, including cuts to local authorities' budgets and an ageing population. They support the need for both a high-level framework document developed at central government level as well as local rural strategies. The Committee has highlighted the importance of effective local services in rural areas which particularly affect more vulnerable sectors of the community. Services like rural transport and dealing with the impact of rural crime. Improving the availability and accessibility of rural healthcare provision, including support for the development of multi-use health centres or hubs is also given prominence in the report. The Committee also says, "Isolation, loneliness and associated physical and mental health challenges are key issues in rural communities. In this context, it is particularly important that policy solutions are rurally oriented, taking account of the greater challenges of combatting isolation in sparsely populated locations." and stresses that Government must address the additional costs of providing rural mental health services and ensure that sufficient staff and support services are available.

On the subject of rural transport I am encouraged by one local example where Kent County Council is establishing a new taxi bus service which will replace a once a week supported market day bus from West Kingsdown into Sevenoaks with a three-times daily service, five days a week, reaching more villages which currently have no public transport including some of the mobile home sites mentioned by Cllr Peter Fleming. We will be watching this with interest, and I hope it is successful.

So, to the Rural Services Network and its partner organisations. We have heard today about the needs of the vulnerable sectors of our rural communities, especially the importance of understanding those needs and collecting and sharing the data. It is essential that support is available for them if we are not to see further unwelcome changes in our rural landscape with the loss of both young and old people because there is nothing for them. The initiatives that have been highlighted today are a big step in the right direction, but we cannot just rely on a piecemeal approach by different agencies. David Inman stressed the importance of this partnership approach and the RSN's call for a comprehensive rural strategy is therefore a key

move and deserves cross-party and cross-sectoral support. It stresses that local action can help to address issues such as isolation, loneliness and vulnerability with the emphasis on providing sufficient resources to enable parish and town councils to sustain services that the principal authorities can no longer afford to run so the involvement of the Kent Association of Local Councils is a welcome step. It is important to note, too, how vulnerability may be increased by rural isolation and the effect of extreme weather, be it flooding, snowfall or drought, must be factored into Local Community Resilience Plans.

Even here in Sevenoaks we have our pockets of deprivation, often hidden amongst the affluence of the majority; we have high living costs that exacerbate the needs of the low-paid; our public transport is expensive and often inadequate; ill health, whether physical or mental, knows no boundaries. Simon Kitchen reminded us that one in fifty people have bipolar and with the predominance of younger people diagnosed, this is a greater challenge. Like anyone else, we have to seek out our vulnerable residents and ensure they are not left isolated. We also understand the importance of helping older and vulnerable people to return to their homes after a hospital stay and only last week a further tranche of Section 106 funding was allocated for the purchase of more hospital discharge packs, mentioned by Hayley Brooks, to provide essential items to facilitate an earlier discharge.

Our presenters today have given us much to think about. I hope we, and the Rural Services Network, will be able to use every opportunity to raise awareness of vulnerable people in rural areas and work together to develop strategies, locally and nationally, that will address their needs. A particular message that has featured several times is the need to promote and, where possible, share data about the Community Services Register as well as the importance of doing everything possible to ensure universal online accessibility as that will inevitably be the principal source of help and advice for many vulnerable people.

Finally, I must thank everyone who participated today: speakers, councillors, officers and the back-room staff at the RSN who put together the programme and ensured everything ran smoothly. And not least my colleagues here in Sevenoaks District Council who provided the room and helped to set everything up. I wish you all a safe journey home and a renewed enthusiasm to ensure that your councils and organisations fully appreciate and respond to the needs of the vulnerable people in your areas.

Cllr Cameron Clark