

Note of last SPARSE Rural Special Interest Group meeting

Title:	Rural Services Network Special Interest Group RSN AGM, followed by Rural Assembly Meeting
Date:	Monday 15 November 2021
Venue:	Online via Zoom

Attendance

An attendance list is attached as [Appendix A](#) to this note.

Item Decisions and actions

RSN AGM meeting

1 Attendance & Apologies.

Cllr Cecilia Motley (Chair) and Graham Biggs MBE (Chief Executive) welcomed members to the AGM and reminded colleagues that the usual meeting would follow immediately afterwards. Members were informed that a meeting of the Rural Social Care and Health Sub Group had taken place prior to this meeting. Apologies were taken as read.

2 RSN Constitution - Updated November 2021.

Mr Biggs outlined recommended minor changes to the Constitution.

Members noted the recommendation that a post be created for a formal Deputy Chair. This was to provide additional support to the Chair due to the increased workloads. Cllr Motley proposed the amendments to the Constitution.

Decision:

Members accepted the recommendation and changes to the Constitution.

3 Appointment of Chairman and Members of the Executive.

Members noted the nomination to Chair and proposed Cllr Motley for a further 12 months. The proposal was seconded and accepted, and Cllr Motley was re-elected without opposition.

She thanked colleagues for their support and reminded colleagues that Zoom events and seminars had ensured that the RSN's important work had continued, despite the pandemic. Working in this way had proved to bring the work of the rural services network to a much greater audience with much enhanced membership engagement. Cllr Motley praised the work of colleagues for their support during a very difficult period. Members noted that many more members from areas across England had been attracted to participate in seminars due to the ease of joining virtually rather than in person.

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The Chair went on to discuss future meetings. The Executive had decided to continue meetings virtually as costs of travelling into London could no longer be justified. This would continue for at least this year. One face to face meeting – possibly next year’s RSN AGM and Rural Assembly – might be held on 14th November 2022. In addition, the RSN Executive meeting on the 21st March 2022 will possibly take place face to face, subject to pandemic situation closer to the date of the meeting.

Decision: Members agreed this approach.

Cllr Motley referred to the need for a deputy Vice-Chair and proposed Cllr Roger Phillips (Herefordshire Council). The proposal was seconded by members.

Cllr Philips accepted the position, saying that it was vital that proper understanding of rural issues needs to stay at the core of the group’s work.

The Chair moved onto the election of Vice-Chairs and existing First vice-chair – Cllr Robert Heseltine (North Yorkshire County Council) was nominated to continue in this position. The proposal was seconded by Cllr Peter Stevens (West Suffolk Council). Cllr Heseltine accepted, and members agreed that the other vice-chairs be re-elected, en bloc.

Mr Biggs added that the Executive also has some vacancies and invited members, to contact him if they were interested in joining the Executive. Members noted the lack of South-East representation and the Chair invited anyone interested to come forward.

4 Notes from the last RSN AGM & Rural Assembly meeting. (Attachment 2)

Cllr Motley informed members that all actions arising from the last meeting, had been taken.

Decision: Members approved the note of the last meeting.

5 Launch Event of [Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision](#).¹

Members heard that the Revitalising Rural campaign launch event had been very well attended and had hit the most important issues in relation to rural areas. There were 14 ‘Chapters’ covering the major issues on concern across rural England.

Mr Biggs informed colleagues that amendments have been made since the event, asking them to note that engagement with Government on individual issues, such as social care, will be dealt with as they become more current, in order to directly engage with Ministers and rural MPs.

Cllr Motley reminded members that the intention was always that this would be a living document and be updated constantly on the website, depending upon current events. She said that she felt that the document fulfils its potential as a reference point and is staying on top of what current issues are.

¹ <https://www.rsonline.org.uk/revitalising-rural>

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Members recognised the work of RSN secretariat colleagues in ensuring that information and views are always considered and updated regularly.

Decision: Members noted the report.

6 **2022 RSN Meeting Schedule.** (Attachment 3)

Members agreed the meeting schedule for 2022.

Mr Biggs reminded colleagues that there may be variation in the agenda if necessary due to changing priorities for consideration.

Decision: Members noted the schedule, and the fact that all future events will take place virtually via Zoom except for the RSN Executive meeting (21st March 2022) and the RSN AGM & Rural Assembly meeting (14th November 2022) which might take place in person depending on the pandemic situation at the time.

Cllr Motley welcomed Rt Hon Phillip Dunne MP, Chair of the **Rural Services APPG** who had kindly agreed to attend with **an overview of work of the APPG** in the last 12 months.

Mr Dunne thanked RSN members and the Secretariat for their input which had been very helpful in informing APPG's work.

He began with an outline of discussions over the year with Ministers which included several issues affecting rural areas, including the Planning White Paper, National Bus Strategy and Rural Proofing. He said that they would also be looking at impacts around social care reforms in the rural context.

Members noted the recent change to the Secretary of State at DLUHC and what this could mean in terms of priorities. In his discussion, Mr Dunne made several points:

- Consequences of changes to the Planning White paper.
- There is an opportunity to make a renewed pitch that levelling up assistance needs to include rural areas and not just urban.
- Implications of the Spending Review and allocations to local authorities. Michael Gove has been asked to recognise that rural areas need to be provided with a settlement for 3 years as this would help local councils to make decisions long term. Over reliance on council tax has been recognised and there is not enough available to rural areas through the grant allocation formulae.
- There are enormous pressures on child and adult social care and government is looking at adding a levy onto social care funding which might help in the future. However, there is a chance that more local assessments will need to be done which will add to the workload of councils.
- The UK shared prosperity fund which is available mostly through revenue rather than capital funding may be applied on a competitive basis. There is a strong case to be made for the shire authorities.

The Chair invited questions and members:

- Congratulated Mr Dunne for work around sewage and asked whether the Planning White Paper would come back. Mr Dunne responded by saying that he

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could not predict whether it would - but in any case, it would not be this year. He encouraged colleagues to press on with their own plans whilst recognising that they might change in the future.

- Referred to biodiversity as a crisis that needs to be addressed. Members felt disconnected from parliament on this issue and were keen to be more engaged and better connected. Mr Dunne spoke about obligations of local authorities in the future saying that the pool of ecologist talent is declining, and local authorities do not have the expertise. He agreed that local authorities have a huge role to play but need to work with local nature groups in order to be able to meet these targets when they are due.
- Raised concerns about land erosion through more intense weather, eutrophication, invasive species biodiversity loss etc. Members agreed that these are all problems which local authorities will need help in addressing.
- Expressed concerns that obtaining funding is very marginal with such limited funding and limited capacity in rural councils.
- Thanked Mr Dunne for raising shire issue with Michael Gove.
- Agreed that multi-year settlements are very much required and needed if local authorities are to be able to meet their duties.

Mr Dunne reminded colleagues to continue working on their projects and to have them ready for when there is greater certainty about funding and applications. Cllr Motley thanked the Speaker for his impromptu attendance and work on the parliamentary group.

At this point, Cllr Motley left the meeting and Graham Biggs took over as the Chair.

Decision: Members noted the update.

7 To re-affirm the decision of a 2% (inflation) increase in subscriptions for membership.

Decision: Members accepted the proposed to increase subscriptions by 2% for 2022/23.

8 Budget 2021/2022 and Estimates 2022/2023 (Constitutional requirement).

Members noted the revised budget for the current financial year which included savings of approx. £20-25k per year from holding future events and meetings virtually.

Members noted a balance forecast of approx. £38k but that this was dependent upon receipt of subscriptions as 75% of the Group's income comes from this source. Members were informed that the next year's estimate is not a true reflection of future years income and that it is anticipated that this may fall due to members on notice of resignation and unitarisation proposals.

Decision: Members approved the estimates for 2022/23 and authorised the Executive to make any necessary in-year changes.

Mr Biggs closed the AGM and opened the Rural Assembly meeting.

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Rural Assembly meeting

9 Notes from the previous RSN Executive meetings. (Attachment 5 & 6)

There were no questions arising from the minutes.

Decision: Members noted the Minutes.

10 Annual Review of RSN Work. (Attachment 7)

Deputy Chief Executive, Kerry Booth provided a roundup of recent work in the last 12 months. Members noted the work of Secretariat which included:

- Networking
- Seminars
- SPARSE meetings focussed on rural funding campaign
- Annual Conference
- Member insights
- Local and national media

Mrs Booth shared several links to assist colleagues with research and mechanisms for support. She spoke about recent consultations, reminding members that emails will be sent to relevant local authority representatives to ensure informed responses.

Members acknowledge the work and asked that they be more aggressive around biodiversity loss. A major crisis area that rural authorities can step up and make a real difference but there needs to be a stronger platform. They asked that visibility be raised in upcoming work as there will be more cases of soil erosion, invasive species, and more habitat loss, with more work for Local Authorities to do. There needs to be a greater understanding of what is expected of them and provide some lead going forward.

Mrs Booth outlined current work and assured colleagues that what is included will be constantly updated to reflect what members want RSN to do. Mr Biggs asked that members acknowledge there is a lack of in-house expertise in respect of the biodiversity issues and that any guidance and evidence to support what is wanted would be most appreciated.

Members discussed the option of holding a dedicated additional meeting to discuss these issues. They agreed that this should be considered with just a small group rather than the whole membership.

Decision: The report was noted, and members were invited to share the document as evidence of the range of work undertaken by RSN on behalf of its members.

11 National Rural Conference 2021.

Mrs Booth provided a short presentation on this year's conference which focussed on levelling up and revitalising rural areas.

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Members noted those who had sponsored the event which was attended by 74 Local Authorities and over 425 delegates. Speakers included Lord Benyon MP, Defra Minister who had given a speech and responded to several questions.

Colleagues were invited to come forward with any topics they would like included in future conferences and Mrs Booth said that involvement of members, either as speakers or resources would be most welcome.

Mr Biggs acknowledged the high standard of the event and praised the great quality of colleagues within the team for their work.

For information about the events of the National Rural Conference 2021, [please follow this link](#).²

Decision: Members noted the presentation.

12 **Guest Speaker Presentations with Short Q&A's.**

Mr Biggs introduced **Robert Cogings, Director of Housing, Derbyshire Dales.**

Members received a presentation on work around estate regeneration, homelessness, and housing affordability in rural areas, referring in particular to Derbyshire Dales. Mr Cogings outlined the purpose behind the programme to improve council housing around the Hurst Farm Estate. He spoke about the importance of community consultation, which had helped identify key issues around regeneration of the estate.

Funding for the project was provided by MHCLG in addition to other financial assistance for key building and insulation. Mr Cogings said that other social enterprises have also been set up to do forestry work in the green estate and included work with Heritage Lottery around improving key places of interest within the Derbyshire Dales. Because of this, there was greater optimism and enthusiasm with the introduction of greater community projects to provide support to vulnerable adults and help rescue people from the pressures of debt.

Colleagues noted that, as a district council, they have housed more people under the Afghan refugee situation than any other part of Derbyshire. They have a commitment to build affordable housing via housing associations.

Mr Cogings referred to several points needing consideration in order to address these issues:

- There needs to be affordability to get onto the housing ladder.
- Market values are rising.
- Shared ownership model is broken, and costs are still too high.
- Prioritising areas of research can lead to substantial gains.
- Although a small authority, Derbyshire Dales have the highest property prices in the country.
- Building and provision of council houses is the way forward.

² <https://rsnonline.org.uk/the-national-rural-conference-2021-conference-learning-outcomes-and-presentations>

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- Assumptions that rural areas are wealthy are unreal and there is real deprivation within these authorities.

Mr Biggs thanked the speaker for an interesting and inspiring presentation. Members made several comments:

- The presentation was inspiring.
- Of affordable housing, how many are in villages and how many in the more urban areas?
- Community-led housing – can make such a difference but it is so difficult to get government funding because they are not considered social registered landlords.

Mr Cogings said that engagement was key. Regional representatives should be involved at an early stage to add support to community-led housing bids. He reminded members to use the expertise of rural providers and to talk to Homes England too, to as a way of helping them to deliver their own ambitions.

Mr Biggs then introduced **Chris Fuller, Economic Development Officer, Torrington Council.**

Mr Fuller referred to the earlier discussion and issues raised by members and agreed that the levelling up agenda should not be a lottery. He outlined several worrying statistics about issues around rural isolation and issues such as recruitment, transport, and connectivity.

He said that the key is to move into long term partnerships with strategic shared visions and input of wider expertise. These need to be developed with Central Government as there is huge focus on greater innovation. Mr Fuller referred to work being done with other stakeholders to promote natural capital by looking at 3 key core elements:

- Fund
- Place
- Measure

Members heard about future projects around green innovation, investment and regeneration and the importance of enlisting support and developing partnerships with Government.

Mr Biggs thanked both speakers for very interesting presentations.

Members agreed that with a little investment from government, so much can be achieved.

Decision: Members noted the presentations.

Action: Secretariat to share slides with members.

13 Discussion with Members about Key Challenges Facing Rural Areas in 2022.

Mr Biggs updated colleagues on work around current challenges, including:

- Social Care White paper.

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- Impact of new changes to health structures in the Health Bill.
- White Paper on Levelling Up and Devolution.
- UK Shared Prosperity Fund.
- Fair Funding Review decisions as to the future of this review may be known in December alongside the Provisional Settlement– will then look at 3-year settlements.
- Net Zero requirements.
- Biodiversity.
- Rural homelessness.
- Rural transport.
- Affordable rural housing.
- Digital connectivity.

Members agreed there was a lot of work ahead. Mr Biggs reminded members that the RSN was proposing a new activity in 2022 to include one-to-one discussions with each authority to get a real feel for the issues and challenges faced in their individual areas.

Colleagues suggested adding flooding and waste/garden waste to the existing list and noted that a response on recent consultations on waste has been sent. Mr Biggs assured them that any flooding events will be raised with Defra.

Members agreed that the summary included both long standing issues and those more recently relevant.

Decision: Members noted the update.

14 Any Other Business.

Members noted the dates of the next meetings in 2022.

The **Rural Assembly meeting** will take place on **Monday, 11th April 2022**. [Please follow this link to register your attendance at the next Rural Assembly meeting.](#)³

And the next **RSN AGM & Rural Assembly meeting** will take place **Monday, 14th November 2022**. [Please follow this link to register your attendance at the next RSN AGM & Rural Assembly meeting.](#)⁴

There was no other business, and the meeting was closed.

³ <https://rural-assembly-meeting2022.eventbrite.co.uk>

⁴ <https://rsnagm-ruralassemblymeeting2022.eventbrite.co.uk>

Appendix A

Attendance

Full name

Vinia Abesamis
 Cllr Giles Archibald
 Cllr Philip Atkins
 Liz Barnard
 Graham Biggs MBE
 John Birtwistle
 Kerry Bolister
 Kerry Booth
 Lillian Burns
 Dr Ian Cass
 Cllr Stephen Clarke
 Robert Cogings
 Martin Collett
 Lois Dale
 Fatima De Abreu
 Cllr Janet Duncton
 Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP
 Cllr John Evans
 Cllr Marion Fitzgerald
 Louise Flavell
 Chris Fuller
 Ian Gillespie
 David Hall
 Nik Harwood
 Cllr Oliver Hemsley
 Cllr Robert Heseltine
 David Inman
 Matt Jones
 Will Jones
 Cllr Patrick Kimber
 Cllr Phil King
 Dr Tom Lawrence
 Cllr Eileen Lintill
 Toby Matthews
 Sean McGrath
 Cllr Cecilia Motley
 Lynne Nicholl
 Cllr Yvonne Peacock
 Cllr Roger Phillips
 Cllr Garry Purdy
 Nicola Radford

Organisation

Herefordshire Council
 South Lakeland District Council
 Staffordshire County Council
 West Suffolk Council
 Rural Services Network
 First Bus
 Housing Plus Group
 Rural Services Network
 National Association of Local Councils (NALC)
 The Forum of Private Business
 West Northamptonshire Council
 Derbyshire Dales District Council
 English Rural Housing Association
 Shropshire Council
 Local Government Association
 West Sussex County Council
 Houses of Parliament
 Uttlesford District Council
 Allerdale Borough Council
 Braintree District Council
 Torridge District Council
 English Rural Housing Association
 Northumberland County Council
 Young Somerset
 Rutland County Council
 North Yorkshire County Council
 Rural Services Network
 Suffolk County Council
 Dartmoor NPA
 West Devon Borough Council
 Harborough District Council
 TRL Insight
 Chichester District Council
 Norfolk County Council
 Lancashire County Council
 Shropshire Council
 Alzheimer's Society
 Richmondshire District Council
 Herefordshire Council
 Derbyshire Dales District Council
 Lincolnshire County Council

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David Rodda MBE
Cllr Jeremy Savage
Cllr Richard Sherras
Cllr Harry St John
Katherine Stanley
Cllr Peter Stevens
Nadine Trout
Arthur Virgo
Cllr Mark Whittington

Cornwall Council
South Norfolk District Council
Ribble Valley Borough Council
West Oxfordshire District Council
West Northamptonshire Council
West Suffolk Council
Rural Services Network
House of Parliament/ Rt Hon Philip Dunne's Office
Lincolnshire County Council

Apologies

Full Name

Tobias Arno
Cllr Owen Bierley
Catherine Blanchard
Cllr Catherine Braun
Cllr Lee Breckon
Cllr Alan E Chantler
Cllr Sam Corcoran
George Denton
Olivia Dryden
Cllr Richard Good
Alan Gray
Cllr William Gray
Roger Habgood
Kate Hampson
Susie Harrison
Paul Henry
Sarah Hulme
Gavin Iredale
Matthew Isom
Valerie Johnston
Rev Richard Kirlew
Rev Richard Kirlew
Rita Lawson
Cllr Liz Leffman
Elizabeth Lodge
Cllr Andrew Macgregor
Nick Mannion
Jo Martin
Rich Matthews
Andrew Potter
Gary Powell
Emily Preston

Organisation

National Federation of Women's Institutes
West Lindsey District Council
Suffolk County Council
Stroud District Council
Leicestershire County Council
West Northamptonshire Council
Cheshire East Council
Broadland District Council and South Norfolk Council
The Princes Countryside Fund
Richmondshire District Council
North Kesteven District Council
East Lindsey District Council
Somerset West and Taunton Council
West Sussex County Council
Warwickshire County Council
Suffolk County Council
Arthur Rank Centre/The Methodist Church
Reed in Partnership
Dispensing Doctors' Association Limited
Tees Valley Rural Action
Agricultural Chaplains Association
Agricultural Chaplains Association
Tees Valley Rural Action
Oxfordshire County Council
Care Plus
Teignbridge District Council
Cheshire East Council
Rural Business Network
Rural Media
Hastoe Housing Association
Teignbridge District Council
Hampshire County Council

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Anna Price
Martin Reohorn
Ruth Buckley-Salmon
Cllr Sue Sanderson
Rev Jane Skinner
Cllr Paul Skinner
Cllr Derrick Spear
Cllr Virginia Taylor
Charlie Thornton
Fiona Thurlbeck
Cllr Nicola Topham
Professor Peter Varley
Cllr Brenda Weston
Helen Wright

Anna Price Strategic Marketing
Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service
Membership organisation
Cumbria County Councillor
Diocese of Exeter
Boston Borough Council
North Devon Council
Eden District Council
Eden District Council
Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council
North Devon Council
Northumbria University
Somerset West and Taunton Council
East Riding of Yorkshire Council

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