

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 16 November 2020
Venue:	via Zoom

Attendance

An attendance and apologies list is attached as **Appendix A** to this note.

Item	Decisions and actions
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1	Attendance & Apologies
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Cllr Celia Motley (Chair) welcomed members to the meeting. Apologies and attendees were noted.

2	Appointment of Chairman and Members of the Executive
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Graham Biggs invited nominations to the roles of Chairman. Cllr Robert Heseltine proposed Cllr Motley to continue as Chairman as stability is vital at this time. The nomination to re-elect the current Chair was seconded by Cllr Gwilym Butler and approved by colleagues without opposition.

Cllr Motley expressed her thanks for confidence in her and referred to the issues around not being able to hold events around the country. Despite this being impossible at the current time, she assured colleagues that work has continued at pace despite restrictions and that meetings had continued in a virtual environment. She informed the group that response has been excellent – contributions and participation has increased due to a better availability and without the need to travel to collaborate. The Chair thanked the whole RSN Team for continuing to achieve a lot despite current issues.

Cllr Motley asked Cllr Robert Heseltine whether he wished to continue as first vice chair to which he accepted. Cllr Motley then proposed that the Executive members be re-appointed en-bloc and that was agreed. If additional colleagues were interested in finding out more or in joining the Executive, they should put forward their details to Graham Biggs. MBE. Janet Duncton enquired whether a replacement for SE England had been found, (it has not) and members were invited to come forward if they were interested in taking the position.

3	Notes from the last RSN AGM & Rural Assembly meeting
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The minutes from the last RSN AGM and Rural Assembly meeting were approved.

4	Notes from the previous RSN Executive meeting
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The minutes from the previous two meetings of the RSN Executive were noted.

5	Changes to Service Delivery to RSN Members 2020
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Members received an update on changes made to enable new ways of working under

current restrictions. These included:

- Introduction of online meetings which have led to increased engagement of 300%;
- Seminar schedules have now been moved online – this now means that everyone can attend, no matter which region they are in. The number of seminars per year will be increased to 9. Evidence has shown that a greater number of officers are now attending;
- Additional events have been successful for example the dedicated session for Finance Officers on the Local Government Finance Settlement and also the session on the impact of the Planning White Paper;
- RSN has been part of Defra's Forum and have been able to feed into Govt discussion on key rural issues;
- A lot of work has been done with specialist regional officers to assist feedback to government and to help shape our response to the planning white paper at a national level.
- Members were reminded to ensure that each of them nominates a member to participate in RSN events;
- Work on the Bulletin has increased and is keeping members informed regularly;
- There is an intention to have individual virtual meetings with councils to discuss key issues once a year from 1st April 2021 (later where elections are being held in May 2021) in order to help RSN to understand current issues;
- Greater links with key roles in individual councils are being developed.

Comments from members included a need for consideration of issues around national parks in the Defra meetings and that they must be included in any discussion around the planning white paper. Mr Biggs confirmed that initially, the focus was looking at data on impacts around COVID-19 but that other issues were being raised with Defra to feed into Govt departments. Members were informed that they are now starting to look at medium and long-term recovery and that many concerns are still the same as before the pandemic. Issues around rural housing and rural proofing still stand and are still being pursued.

Members referred to concerns in their own areas and Defra's lack of knowledge where suggestions around farming etc. are being put forward. Mr Biggs agreed to discuss any individual problems further and invited any colleagues affected to speak to him separately so that these can be raised with Government. Members agreed that the planned individual meetings would be an opportunity to take forward work around these issues.

Mr David Inman referred to inequalities around market town establishments not being allowed to open despite supermarkets being able to. Other small businesses have also expressed concerns and he invited members to put forward suggestions.

The report was noted.

6 2021 RSN Meeting schedule

Members noted the dates of future meetings and that these would continue virtually

for the foreseeable future.

7 To agree the subscriptions for 2021/22 as recommended by the Executive

Mr Biggs asked members to note the recommendations for an increase at the level of inflation provision (2.75%) next year, although future years would be a flat increase of 2% per annum. It was agreed that income via fees should match the level and the cost of work expected.

The costs were supported but members felt that the narrative needs to express the need to pay staff appropriately to take forward the work anticipated. They acknowledge the severe financial difficulties facing councils at this time and the need therefore to make clear that the increase is necessary if the work targets are to be met.

Members agreed unanimously.

8 Budget 2020/2021 and Estimates 2021/2022 (Constitutional requirement)

Mr Biggs referred to the importance of member retention. Budgets have been drawn up with the caveat that nothing changes in terms of income. He said that unfortunately, payment of subscriptions from some authorities are still outstanding and chasing them continues to be an issue. The group noted the anticipated balance for next year and were reminded of their agreement to establish properly salaried posts for Senior Officers in coming years.

Members noted and agreed the budget report.

9 RSN response to Planning White Paper and Changes to the Current Planning System

Cllr Motley referred to the Planning White Paper and invited Mr Biggs to update colleagues on recent consultations. Changes to the current planning system will have a detrimental impact on rural housing. The wider consultation had received several responses and members noted that RSN had also hosted a seminar in advance of contributing to fine-tune a response.

Colleagues also heard about recent meetings and discussions and Mr Biggs informed them that RSN are awaiting a response to the discussion on rural concerns around the white paper. Members who had contributed to the response will be updated as further information is received.

10 National Rural Conference 2020

Kerry Booth updated colleagues on the recent National Rural Conference which was held online over five days. Members received a presentation on the agenda and heard that feedback had been very good.

Members noted the range of sessions offered and numbers attending. Feedback around the sessions has been sought and secretariat will look at and consider the results around ideas for next time. Overall, although it was different, it was felt to be a huge success. The number of attendees was impressive, and ideas will be built upon for next year.

Cllr Motley praised the work done by Kerry and Marija in particular but also acknowledge input and commitment from colleagues, in order to make the conference such a success. She reiterated the great range of items covered and the excellent

feedback received. She agreed that five days was a lot in terms of the amount of work generated and said that she would support re-consideration of the format for next time with regards to length.

Members expressed how impressed they were with the event and in particular the quality of speakers participating. This may not have been possible in a physical environment and it was a fantastic first online effort.

11 Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision

Members received a presentation from Mr Biggs.

He provided background to the call to Government for a rural strategy and outlined the introduction of the House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy. A clip from Lord Foster opening the debate in the House of Lords was included for information which discussed inequalities between rural and urban economies and additional costs incurred by rural areas.

Members noted that although the government had refused the call, it had responded by saying that a range of measures was being put in place to ensure that rural areas continue to thrive and that it would 'renew its vision for rural England'. Mr Biggs referred to mitigating circumstances which currently prevent this from happening. The RSN therefore decided to provide a document (Revitalising Rural) which reiterates and articulates how investing in rural areas can help the government and the national economy.

Members noted that the document was very high-level and that the planned seminars etc. would serve to underpin it with even more important detail. RSN were keen to raise its profile and had included an article within First Magazine for October and were seeking support and engagement with members of the House of Lords Select Committee, the APPG as well as other key organisations and decision makers in Parliament.

Mr Biggs outlined next steps and announced that a formal launch of the document was planned for February 2021. The intention is to demonstrate to government that it makes sense to engage and invest in rural areas to aid the economy. He stated that members would be consulted for case studies to inform the launch and asked members to consider highlighting the document (further to the launch) in their local media and by other available means to inform.

Cllr Cecilia Motley (Chair) agreed the importance of case studies as evidence and demonstration of the differences that can be made. The group was invited to comment.

They said:

- There will be a huge emphasis on recovery once we are past the worst of COVID-19 – there will be an appetite to grow the economy and the future of rural must be included at that time.
- Need to try and demonstrate other ways of doing things and it is vital that everyone is engaged in writing and presenting this document.
- Whilst the outcome might be economic, all these issues are interdependent on each other to create a thriving economy.

The Chair thanked Graham Biggs MBE for an insightful presentation.

12 Report from the Chair of the Rural Services APPG

Report on the Work of the APPG on Rural Services

Cllr Motley took the opportunity to welcome Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP.

Mr Dunne expressed the importance of the secretariat in evidence sharing and thanked colleagues for their contribution to discussions. He outlined recent sessions where topical issues had been raised including those around rural transportation and connectivity. It was noted that Government has made a pledge to increase delivery of broadband. However, delays in getting supply to rural areas to replace copper wiring were disappointing and there were concerns about implications to rural users if no alternative is in place, in time.

Mr Dunne referred to recent discussions on progress around the spending review and the announcement by the Chancellor that this will now only be for one year.

There will be elements of long-term projects which will need some security that they will be able to progress. He spoke about levelling up for rural areas and consequences of COVID-19 on making assumptions around costs and uncertainties when contracting - with implications on planning.

Mr Dunne added that it was helpful to have a sense of issues that the network would like to raise in the future, and that he would be happy to engage further when the group wished. Cllr Cecilia Motley (Chair) invited questions from colleagues:

- Cllr Peter Thornton asked about the emergency services broadband scheme and referred to the lack of mobile networks in Cumbria. Mr Dunne suggested the council write to the Home Office asking how they are planning to ensure connectivity in the region and the community and at what point besides that around emergency services.
- Cllr Yvonne Peacock also expressed concerns around when analogue disappears and the urgency in ensuring broadband is in place before then. Mr Dunne suggested that discussion take place with those responsible for the handover and resilience when the switchover happens. Graham Biggs MBE agreed the importance of placing this item on the agenda and said that they would look at getting BT to engage with discussions.
- Cllr Duncton raised concerns around the dated infrastructure of sewage and water works in rural areas. Mr Dunne asked members to note that he had a particular interest in this himself and had recently put the issue around infrastructure in housing development and the lack of joining up between those responsible for dealing with increase of population. He encouraged the group to look at his campaign for untreated sewage which is spilling into our rivers and to support his Bill:
<https://www.sas.org.uk/EndSewagePollution-SewageBill> .
- Cllr Richard Good outlined issues around broadband and the problems faced by schoolchildren studying remotely and accessing schoolwork. He asked whether there had been any progress on banning sky lanterns, particularly around the detrimental effects on the countryside and to cattle. Mr Dunne assured the group that he would take away that point around pollution.

- Cllr Roger Phillips endorsed Mr Dunne's work around river pollution and the importance of keeping an eye on the Environment Bill – particularly around diffuse pollution from agriculture.
- Cllr Mary Robinson referred to the installation of fibre in her district and the compared maintenance costs of copper wiring. She referred to alternatives in accessing networks via use of the government voucher schemes and offered to inform secretariat as a way of sharing best practice. Mr Dunne agreed that there are pockets of great practice and the information should be shared. Members agreed that discrimination needs to be addressed and in particular regarding those companies whose purpose is to make a huge profit by taking advantage of the voucher scheme.
- Cllr Peter Stevens spoke about expansion of protected landscapes and the need for careful consideration around the complexities of mass tree planting. He outlined the importance of maintaining healthy trees and the consequences of not doing so. Mr Dunne recognised the need to ensure agricultural economies and viability of achieving targets. There is a determination to get to 30% by 2030 – a designation of 1 or 2 national parks would be done in the first instance which would go a long way to reaching the targets. He said that there is bound to be pressure around diversity and a need to be sensitive and well advised in terms of which trees are planted and where they come from.

Cllr Cecilia Motley (Chair) thanked Mr Dunne for a wide-ranging discussion and for responding to so many questions. Members acknowledged the valued engagement in addressing rural issues with the RSN as well as other relevant bodies such as the APPG. They spoke briefly about rural bus services and the expectation that the rural bus strategy will be announced next year.

13 Any Other Business

Graham Biggs MBE referred to the recent invitation to the RSN to provide evidence on a House of Lords COVID-19 enquiry around the impact of digitalisation. Members will be contacted with suggestions as to a response and a call to submit anything further. This will be released publicly in due course.

Cllr Peter Stevens raised concerns about the potential to reduce subscriptions due to savings from venue costs if online meetings continue. Graham Biggs MBE confirmed that feedback from members had shown a preference for virtual meetings, reminding him of the difficulties faced by colleagues in attending London meetings even when it is possible to do so. Evidence shows that both attendance and engagement has increased - which is an enormous benefit to the group. He further stated that reductions in expenditure were being applied to increase services to members.

Cllr Cecilia Motley (Chair) thanked colleagues for their attendance and contribution to the meeting and the meeting was closed.

The next Rural Assembly meeting is scheduled for Monday, 12th April 2021 and the next joint RSN AGM & Rural Assembly meeting is scheduled for Monday, 15th November 2021.

Appendix A

Attendance

First Name	Surname	Organisation
Catriona	Adams	National Federation of Women's Institutes
Cllr Victoria	Aitken	East Riding Council
Cllr Philip	Atkins	Staffordshire County Council
Cllr Owen	Bierley	West Lindsey District Council
Graham	Biggs MBE	Rural Services Network
John	Birtwistle	FirstGroup plc
Kerry	Booth	Rural Services Network
Tony	Brown	Northumberland County Council
Cllr Lillian	Burns	National Association of Local Councils (NALC)
Cllr Gwilym	Butler	Shropshire Council
Daniel	Carey-Dawes	CPRE, the countryside charity
Cllr Ian	Carrington	North Kesteven District Council
Amy	Cobbett	NFU
Fatima	De Abreu	Local Government Association
Richard	Dowson	Raising Aspirations Empowering Change Ltd
Cllr Janet	Dunton	West Sussex County Council
Rt Hon Philip	Dunne MP	UK Parliament
Cllr John	Evans	Uttlesford District Council
Katherine	Fairclough	Cumbria County Council
David	Fisher	Lantra Awards
Cllr Marion	Fitzgerald	Allerdale Borough Council
Cllr Richard	Good	Richmondshire District Council
Cllr Roger	Habgood	Somerset West and Taunton member for Monument Ward
Cllr Michael	Harris OBE	New Forest District Council
Nik	Harwood	Young Somerset
Cllr Robert	Heseltine	North Yorkshire County Council
Cllr David	Hitchiner	Herefordshire Council
Stewart	Horne	West Devon Business Information Point
Ian	Hunter	Creative Rural Industries Consortium
Prof. Alastair	Hutchison	Dorset County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust
David	Inman	Rural Services Network
Cllr Neil	Jory	West Devon Borough Council
Jackie	King	Tandridge District Council
Rev. Richard	Kirlew	Sherborne Deanery Rural Chaplaincy
Sarah	Lee	Countryside Alliance
Cllr Malcolm	Leeding	Foresthill with Hostover Parish Council
Holly	Lombardo	National Rural Touring Forum
Jo	Martin	Rural Business Network
Rich	Matthews	Rural Media
Jane	Mordue	Citizens Advice Rural Issues Group
Cllr Suzie	Morley	Mid Suffolk District Council
Cllr Cecilia	Motley (Chair)	Rural Services Network/Shropshire Council
Cllr Yvonne	Peacock	Richmondshire District Council
Amanda	Phillips	United Utilities
Cllr Roger	Phillips	Herefordshire Council

Heather	Pitchford	Health Education England
Dr. Ken	Pollock	Worcestershire County Council
Carole	Quinn	United Utilities
Julia	Raven	South Northamptonshire Council
Cllr Rupert	Reichhold	East Northamptonshire District Council
Cllr Louise	Richardson	Leicestershire County Council
Cllr Mary	Robinson	Eden District Council
Cllr Jeremy	Savage	South Norfolk District Council
Kay	Sentance	RU Here
Cllr Richard	Sherras	Ribble Valley Borough Council
Ian	Sherriff	University of Plymouth
Cllr Paul	Skinner	Boston Borough Council
Claire	Smith	Wessex Water
Cllr Peter	Stevens	West Suffolk Council
Cllr Dr Virginia	Taylor	Eden District Council
Cllr Peter	Thornton	Cumbria County Council
Cllr Sue	Tucker	Scarborough Borough Council
Cllr Simon	Walsh	Essex County Council
Cllr John	Ward	Babergh District Council
Elizabeth	Warwick	Wales & West Utilities
Cllr Mark	Winnington	Staffordshire County Council

Apologies

First Name	Last Name	Organisation
Amy	Barker	Green Energy UK
Ben	Colson	Bus Users
Katherine	Fairclough	Cumbria County Council
Cllr Julian	German	Cornwall Council
Cllr Gordon	Hook	Teignbridge District Council
Ian	Hunter	Creative Rural Industries Consortium
Gavin	Jones	Hastoe Group
Jo	Martin	Rural Business Network
Elizabeth	McNabb	Blackdown Support Group / NHS
Patricia	Miller	Dorset County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust
Jane	Mordue	Citizens Advice Rural Issues Group
Louise	Norris	North East Ambulance Service - NHS Foundation Trust
Amanda	Phillips	United Utilities
Heather	Pitchford	Health Education England
Gary	Powell	Teignbridge District Council
Cllr Susan	Prochak	Rother District Council
Carole	Quinn	United Utilities
Julia	Raven	South Northamptonshire Council
Cllr Sue	Sanderson	Cumbria County Council
Cllr Paul	Skinner	Boston Borough Council
Claire	Smith	Wessex Water
Cllr Anthony	Trollope-Bellew	Somerset West and Taunton District Council
Cllr Rob	Waltham MBE	North Lincolnshire Council
Helen	Wood	South East Water