

## **REPORT TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

### **ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF RURAL SOUNDING BOARDS**

#### **Principle:**

Establishment of a Rural Sounding Board to provide a rural voice for member authorities.

#### **Background:**

There are currently few existing mechanisms in English rural areas for gauging opinions on rural issues. One of the characteristics of a rural area is a scattered population. In England (unlike the other Home Countries) there are a number of rural areas scattered diversely across the Country instead of being contained in large rural belts. The ordinary and community membership of the Rural Services Network is quite extensive (particularly the latter) and we have had success with developing a system of 'Calls for Evidence'. These calls often ask for views in particular topic areas with invitations that go out to sections of the network or sometimes across all of our contacts.

However these Calls for Evidence are often used to return specific examples and case studies of best practice and experience rather than offering a consensus or a 'rural voice' from a group of people. It is felt that there is capacity and a need for both the Call for Evidence system and the Sounding Board proposal.

It is thought that the development of a Rural Sounding Board would provide through special groups, a consensus Rural Voice for our dispersed communities.

#### **Format of Sounding Board**

It is anticipated that the Sounding Board would operate as follows:

- 3 questionnaires or surveys a year i.e. one every 4 months
- The Board or Boards would comprise two sections
  - 1) The appointed member Councillor representative for the RSN.  
Alternatively this could be a nominated Councillor.  
This section would comprise 115 people as we have 115 member authorities.
  - 2) The appointed parish or town Councillor representative from the parishes / towns in the Rural Services Community Group. (All parishes in a district or Borough Council member area are invited to be involved and currently we have approximately 9000 such parishes involved on this basis.)

Establishing nominated councillors from such a large number of organisations would take time and clearly responses from them about whether they wished to take part would be mixed. However it is felt it would be a desirable medium term objective.

- We would use these boards in tandem on one occasion a year but separately on the other two occasions.

We are of course aware that questions would have to be put in a way that means respondents can complete questionnaires in the shortest possible time (tick box). Survey monkey has proved a useful system and anticipate using this online method for the Sounding Board.

RSN would prefer to establish a Sounding Board approach rather than a full survey panel as a panel would need to be representative demographically of their rural communities which would take significant resources to achieve. In addition they often offer incentives to take part to increase response rates and this whole process would be more complex and resource intensive to organise. This is an approach that could be considered in the future.

The establishment of Sounding Boards as set out above seems to be a simple logical step to supplement the 'Calls for Evidence'. They would be voluntary but given the number of people involved this system, it is felt they should produce reasonable response rates.

### **Future areas of work**

The RSN will progress with the development of the Sounding Boards as set out above however there may be some additional developments to this process in the future if they are working well.

In the Rural Services Community Group are approximately 3800 primary schools and 500 secondary schools. These are community members based on their respective County Councils being members. Considering the secondary sector first, there could be potential for a Young Persons Sounding Board. If we could persuade some of these Secondary Colleges to be involved (for example one or two per county) we feel there could be an interesting contribution from young people into many rural studies. This could be complimented by also involving the Landex Colleges in this arrangement. It is an area we would also like to investigate once the Member Sounding Boards are working effectively.

It would of course be of value to constitute a sounding board system that relates to Rural Services Partnership organisations. They are of course included in 'Calls for Evidence' but use of the various service groups particularly in relation to specific questions which relate to their topics seems a natural way forward as these service groups develop over the coming year.

**Benefits to member organisations:**

The results of surveys carried out through the Rural Sounding Boards would be made available on the RSN website and would be circulated to members. The overall analysis of each survey could be of use to rural authorities in shaping policy decisions as there would be a rural perspective of key issues available to them.

In addition member authorities could ensure that by taking part in the surveys, they are expressing the views of their rural areas and representing their residents, in a forum where the results will be shared with key interested stakeholders and decision makers.