

MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE OF THE RURAL SERVICES NETWORK

MONDAY 24th JUNE AT MARY SUMNER HOUSE, 24 TUFTON STREET, LONDON

Present: Cllr Cecilia Motley, (Chair for Meeting), Cllr Robert Heseltine, Cllr Peter Thornton, Cllr Mike Tomkin (representing Gordon Nicholson -Eden DC) , Cllr Derek Haley, John Birtwistle (Transport), Richard Kirlew(Community), Stuart Horne (Business), David Dickinson

Officers present - Graham Biggs, Dan Bates, Kerry Booth, David Inman

Apologies- Cllr Roger Begy (Chairman), Cllr Mac Cotterell, Cllr Julian German, Cllr Hilary Carrick, Cllr Gordon Nicholson, Cllr Peter Stephens, Cllr Nick Worth, Cllr Betty Harvey, Patrick Begg (National Trust), Barbara Shaw (Community)

1. ITEMS FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

(a) Discussion about status of Rural England

The Directors agreed to this being structured as a Community Interest Company with the Directors comprising relevant officers.

(b) Rural England Steering Group

The Steering Group would comprise 7 former Commissioners from the CRC, one former Director, Sponsors, and invited representatives from ACRE, the National Trust, CCRI and the Plunkett Foundation.

(c) Rural Transport

John Birtwistle updated the meeting concerning the current developments in relation to Bus Service Operator Grant issues which it was hoped could, as a package of measures, be settled by Government in the near future.

2. BUDGET STATEMENT

The Chief Executive circulated the out turns from 2012/13 and the position for 2013/14. The position on membership was given. There was little variance from the equivalent percentage payment position at this stage in previous years.

The Chief Executive reported on a small Corporation Tax claim from the Inland Revenue. Stuart Horne agreed to try to help the CE with this matter.

3. 2013/14 BUDGET SURVEY

The position established was detailed by the Finance Director.

Sixty Four authorities had responded - a good technical response.

Whilst Districts were having the biggest cut in percentage terms, Counties had a greater proportionate reduction in Government Funding but used reserves in 13/14 to make good this shortfall. Counties and unitaries were tending to use New Homes Bonus straight into the base budget while a greater proportion of Districts were more inclined to put more into balances as they were concerned about future years. There was concern that development planned now may given the economic situation not take place for some years and the money should not be relied on. Many were looking at it in six year planning terms.

Little account was currently being taken of the Community Infrastructure levy. The fear was the impact would be negligible.

In terms of Localised Business Rates Retention only 1 in 5 were venturing above baseline level; 3 in 5 took it as the basis to operate. Uncertainty about appeals was singled out by many authorities as the main reason for their uncertainty relating to business rates income.

There was divergence between neighbouring authorities in many cases so few common regional patterns were emerging.

There was continuing concern about whether Finance Officers truly understood the position. Less than half felt they did at this stage.

When the RA comes out we would provide individual reports for each authority.

4. RURAL FAIR SHARES CAMPAIGN

The Executive considered two points raised by the main meeting and considered as follows:-

(a) Working with Others

The request that, wherever possible, we work with the District Group and the CCN and the LGA was noted. The Exec noted the position and would try where possibilities emerged to do that, although resource distribution issues presented difficulties for all of those bodies given the diverse nature of their membership.

(b) Party Conferences

It would clearly be beneficial to take this approach. However the Ch Exec pointed out the cost implications involved and the other costs heads that the campaign was occurring. There was concern about how heavily this was currently leaning on the budget. There may be a need for a further request for a voluntary subscription to be considered to keep progressing through these choppy waters.

The Executive considered the following:-

(a) Meeting with Minister

The meeting involving Neil Parish MP and Dan Rogerson MP had gone well and the Minister had encouraged further meetings in the autumn. He welcomed proposals which he said DCLG would be prepared to consider but obviously no guarantees could be given.

(b) Draft Action Plan

The CE circulated a rolling business plan prepared to run through the rest of the financial year itemising when work on fairer funding issues was anticipated to have its peaks. The Executive agreed this programme which would be revised following a meeting the next day with Graham Stuart, Neil Parish & Dan Rogerson.

5. PRINCES COUNTRYSIDE FUND BID

A bid had been made to the Fund based on a number of the aspects of the Rural England programme. It was the start of initiatives which would need to be taken if these proposals were to go forward.

6. REVISED SERVICES AND WEBSITE

Kerry Booth had been appointed with a view to making the network really inter active. She gave a brief presentation on this topic. RSN wanted to develop a system that encouraged as much inter change between members as possible. It appeared vital as staff numbers fell and working circumstances became more and more difficult for joined up information exchange and joint working to be championed.

It was felt there was tremendous advantage to be gained as RSN could link not only across rural authorities but also with other service providers and the communities they served. Two initiatives had begun already, one in relation to Environmental Health and a second in relation to Policy and Performance. Both networks had started strongly. This would be the start of a series of service networks which would be created and would hang from an overall network discussing rural issues that came into the limelight.

7. UNITARY GROUP

The work of creating a Unitary Group had continued. A meeting had been set up at the LGA Conference on the 4th of July. 9 of the 11 Unitaries approached were sending representatives and it was hopeful the meeting would be able to put down firm tap roots to take this forward.

8. RURAL ENGLAND

In addition to the considerations under (1) above the position generally was outlined. It was moving forward satisfactorily. An update was also given about the proposed Rural Evidence Exchange involving CCRI, Lincoln University and Newcastle University where the RSN had been asked to play a role and the hoped for inter relationship between the two.

9. PATRON

Sir John Major, Baroness Byford, Lord Knight, and Lord Taylor had been approached following the Executive's agreement and responses were awaited.

10. PROGRESS ON SERVICE GROUPS

The referral from the main meeting from one member who was keen to see the group specialising on core financial work and not on RSP Groupings and other wider rural work was considered.

Whilst recognising that the SPARSE financial work was extremely important and therefore the point being made was fully understood, it was felt that making progress would in fact be a lot more difficult if the Group were narrower. The Rural MP's Rural Fair Share Group had done extremely well in highlighting the SPARSE case but was interested in a wider agenda than just the Local Government one and the RSN had in fact met with increasing success in getting issues highlighted since it widened out. All of the RSP Groups being formed (Health, Crime, Housing, Transport, Fire) would be linked back to Local Authority Officers dealing with those roles and certainly member authorities stood to gain by the RSP work.

Whilst it was fully appreciated that there was many ways forward which could be followed it was felt the RSN were on the track which provided the greatest likelihood of success.

There was a feeling that the group should be also looking at liaison with the activity of Rural LEPs and the officers would look at this and report back.

RSP Groups

(a) Housing

We were working with the CIOH here. The first newsletter (Rural Housing Spotlight) had been issued and we were doing a slot at the National Conference. Getting membership was proving difficult but every attempt was being made to get paying members to make the arrangement self funding.

(b) Health

The Annual Conference (Challenging Times- One Year On) would take place on Friday 18th of October at Sandy Park Rugby Ground Exeter. We are working this year with Devon CC.

Membership fees were currently over £3000 and target to estimate.

The outcomes in terms of formula reflection of rural costs were not good. RSN had asked to join the ACRA group but nothing had yet been heard back.

Concern was expressed by the CE about the lack of response from authorities about setting up of accounting systems to be able to capture rural v urban cost data regarding the new Public Health duties. If some authorities did not emerge to do this it made it far harder to argue the rural case here.

The position would be looked at by the Rural Unitary Group Meeting at the LGA Conference and Graham would also consult on this and the ACRA position with Sheena Asthana. (Plymth Univ)

(c) Crime

We were presenting a proposal to the

the Association of Police Crime Commissioners on 18th July when they were holding a Rural Crime Seminar. Arrangements had been agreed with key partners for a RSN initiated Working Group with the Countryside Alliance, the National Community Safety Network, Farmers Weekly and (hopefully) the NFU Mutual. Many Police Commissioners had been encouraging about this network opportunity and it was hoped the Association would show favour for the proposals.

(d) Fire

A Rural Grouping of 12 Fire and Rescue Services had been formed which would argue the rural financial case and give comments on the current 'review' proposals from Sir Ken Knight report.

(e) Transport

There was less opportunity to form a group here because of the competition between franchise operators. It was hoped to develop a good relationship with the Operators National Body. The RSN had been asked to present a group session on Rural Transport at the LGA Rural Conference in Warwick in September.

11. HIGHWAYS AND STREET LIGHTING- CALL ON DISTRICTS

Cllr Tomkin set out the case encountered in Eden and other parts of Cumbria. It appeared to be an issue unique to that region. A note was circulated. The Council had asked Ofgen to become involved but were still awaiting a reply.

If the matter could not be agreed satisfactorily it was agreed we would try to get Eden audience to the APPG to see if the issue could be taken up by parliamentarians.

12. REVIEW OF RURAL CLASSIFICATION

Defra were looking at updating and possibly reviewing this area. RSN would be on the Working Group. It was felt every attempt should be made to leave the current classification system in place and calls should be made for it to be incorporated into rural proofing systems so that the impact of financial changes in each classification of rural areas was transparent.

13. RURAL COMMUNITIES BROADBAND FUND

The meeting Chair brought up the frustrations which had built up around the present system and the difficulties occasioned by the Defra rules and regulations. It was understood the National Audit Office would be commenting adversely about the way the Fund had operated. The Network was asked to pursue through the APPG and The Defra Select Committee if necessary – Shropshire would provide a detailed note of the issues.