



## **MEETING OF RURAL SERVICES PARTNER GROUP**

**Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2019 from 12noon – 1pm**

**Soroptomists Club, 63 Bayswater Road, London, W2 3PH**

### **AGENDA**

Chaired by Rev Richard Kirlew, Chair of Rural Services Partnership

1. Apologies for Absence
2. Minutes of Previous Meeting  
9<sup>th</sup> April 2019 (See Attachment 1)  
First Bus manifesto (See Attachment 2)  
Response to action/comments raised
3. Digby Chacksfield, Otley College presentation on delivering a health and wellbeing project. Q&A session
4. Hazel Graham, Chief Executive, Cumbria Action for Sustainability presentation on "Driving a shift to zero carbon in a rural area – raising ambition, bringing about positive social, environmental and economic change and building an effective cross-sector partnership". Q&A session
5. Discussion
6. Any Other Business

**Rural Services Partner Group Inaugural Meeting**

**Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> April 2019**

Venue – 63, Bayswater Rad, London.

**Present:**

Jane Mordue (Citizens Advice), Nik Harwood (Chief Executive, Young Somerset), Steven Bland (Regional Housing Manager, English Rural Housing Association), Digby Chackfield (Rural Enterprise East, East and Otley College), Harriot English (Head of Engagement, Plunkett Foundation), Revd Elizabeth Clark MA (National Rural Officer for the Methodist and United Reformed Churches, Germinate The Arthur Rank Centre), Amanda Fearn (Development Director, The National Youth Agency), Revd Richard Kirlew (The Sherborne Deanery Rural Chaplaincy), Laura Cochran (Parkinson's UK), John Birtwistle (First Group), Emma Bould (Programme Partnerships Project Manager, Alzheimer's UK), Henry Lee (External Policy & Research Co-ordinator, Hastoe Housing), Tony Price (Trent and Dove Housing), David Rowe (Chief Executive, CSW Group), Mr Leeding (Oxfordshire Association of Parish & Town Councils)

RSN Officers Graham Biggs (GB) (Chief Executive RSN/RSP), David Inman (DI) (Corporate Director RSN/RSP) Jon Tuner (JT) (Policy Director RSN)

**Apologies for Absence:**

Rod Hammerton (Shropshire Fire & Rescue), Nigel Wilcock (Institute of Economic Development (IED)), Martin Roehorn (Director of Finance, Hereford & Worcester Fire), Darren Henley (Chief Executive, Arts Council England), Matthew Isom (Chief Executive, Dispensing Doctors' Association Ltd), Marcus Clinton (Reaseheath College), Cllr Roger Phillips (Hereford & Worcester Fire)

GB was asked by the Chairman Rev Kirlew to provide a short explanation about the work of the Rural Services Network. (RSN). For more details please refer to the RSN website – link

<https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/>

Group Responded

A membership diagram was requested. It was agreed that this would be circulated with the meeting notes. To view the latest version of this diagram [click here](#)

**1. Election of Chair and Vice Chair of the Group**

The Chairman explained that this item would form part of the next meeting to take place in November, which will take place as part of the formal Rural Services Partnership Ltd AGM on 19<sup>th</sup> November.

**2. Rural Services Partnership**

GB outlined the formal structure of the RSN and the role of the Rural Services Partnership Ltd which is a membership organisation. GB explained that the RSP Ltd is a Private Company limited by Guarantee, the legal and financial part of the organisation, and is the non-local

government part of the RSN. It works predominately with both the private and third sector service providers/interest groups across rural England.

The Rural Services Network is a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association. It comprises two sub Special Interest Groups, Sparse-Rural and the Rural Assembly, (both also membership organisations) which are local authority members of RSN.

Now that the RSP has increased its membership in the past 12 months, it was considered necessary to avoid confusion between the RSP Ltd and the RSP. As a result, a new sub group was proposed The Rural Services Partner Group (RSPG). This would avoid the group being constrained by Company rules and regulations in its deliberations. A formal decision regarding the setting up of the RSPG would need to be ratified at the RSP Ltd AGM on 19<sup>th</sup> November

### **3. Ruarl Services Partner Group Protocol**

GB outlined the suggested purpose of the paper and asked for members to review the document and forward comments to JT in May. The Protocol will be considered in more detail, including feedback from members, at the RSP Ltd AGM

### **4. The Remit of the Ruarl Services Partner Group**

JT outlined the suggested future remit and purpose of the RSPG and the 'tools' available for members to inform the RSN's policy work and representation and lobbying priorities. Members were asked to feedback their comments to JT about the sectors represented and whether others need to be approached and to suggest other organisations which RSN could approach to join the network.

The Group Responded

Members were keen to engage with colleagues and partners organisations and encourage them to join the RSPG.

### **5. Feedback from the RSN Health & Care Meeting and the Rural Assembly meeting held on the 8<sup>th</sup> April.**

GB explained that there were two presentations at the Health & Care Meeting by Hampshire County Council and ACRE. The Hampshire CC presentation outlined the benefits of data technology in the delivery of adult social care services and ACRE's presentation considered aspects of rural health in the NHS's 10 Year Plan.

The Rural Assembly received a presentation on Rural England CIC's "State of the Rural Services Report 2018"

All three presentations slide will be available on the RSN website.

### **6. Feedback on the Rural Vulnerability Panel Meeting**

DI reported on the morning's meeting and the purpose and role of the RSPG Vulnerability Panel. DI emphasised the need for rural areas to be given special consideration by Government and services providers, as the challenges experienced by rural people and communities were exacerbated by many factors which were different to those experienced in urban areas.

The Group Responded

Some members who were not present in the morning asked if they could attend the next panel meeting.

The next panel meeting will take place on 19<sup>th</sup> November.

## **7. The Call for a Rural Strategy.**

GB explained that RSN had approached a number of other rural organisations to work collectively to call on the Government to consider rural communities in a post BREXIT world and not just think of rural as food/farming/environment. Unfortunately, a consensus could not be reached within the group about the some of the terminology and so the RSN decided to proceed on its own to prepare a Template Rural Strategy. This was launched as a national campaign on 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2019

The RSN was carrying out work to add depth and texture to the Template Rural Strategy. To that end GB was also seeking input from members to engage in themes workshops to develop and strengthen the evidence base to put before Government. RSN were in the process of organising themed video conference workshops with members over the coming months.

GB also commented that the House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy is due to publish their findings on the 2<sup>7th</sup> April, in which there may be a recommendation for a Rural Strategy. Furthermore, following a meeting in Taunton on the 8<sup>th</sup> March led by Lord Cameron, the RSN, working with ACRE, The Plunket Foundation and the Rural Coalition were considering a series of 3 or 4 regional seminars which would provide the opportunity to consider rural issues at a regional level.

GB asked members to review the RSN website which outlined the purpose of the Call for a Rural Strategy, and if they had not done so already sign up and support the campaign. Please refer to the following link for details

<https://www.rsonline.org.uk/time-for-a-rural-strategy>

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/time-for-a-rural-strategy>

GB also asked if members could provide 'real life' case studies where rural communities and residents were experiencing challenges as a consequence of living in rural areas. This would assist the media interest.

The group agreed to respond if they had not done so already.

A group member raised concern about the need for Parish Councils to be encouraged to be engaged in the process, especially small councils. GB replied that NALC were RSP members

Other group members raised concern about the digital economy in rural areas, where banks and other financial service providers withdraw services. Their commitment to upskill the community to use digital technology was very light touch.

## **8. Housing in Rural Areas – Presentation by Henry Lee, Hastoe Housing Group**

Henry outlined the ground breaking work of Hastoe Housing and the Rural Housing Alliance and current national housing policy relevant to rural areas.

To review the presentation please refer to the [following link](#)

9. **Alzheimer's work from a rural perspective.** – Presentation by Emma Bould, Alzheimer's UK. Emma provided a very useful introduction to the work Alzheimer's UK has been undertaking in rural areas and a review of their Dementia-friendly rural communities guide.

To review a copy of the Dementia – friendly rural communities guide please visit [www.alzheimers.org.uk/rural](http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/rural)

10. **Public Transport in rural areas where do we go from here** – presentation by John Birtwistle, First Group.

John raised the following points during his presentation about the challenges that bus operators experience in today's market place.

- bus is the glue linking facilities services and people; politicians need educating about how buses work
- small local family businesses are giving up and closing
- local authority spending cuts lead to greatest reduction in discretionary spend – LTAs are only required to identify missing socially necessary services, not fund them
- there have been cuts but don't take the stats at face value
- Bus Services Act 2017 provides toolkit for urban areas – voluntary partnership remains the best approach
- Open data already available but will become greater in scope – fares, buses moving on maps
- Concessionary reimbursement is still falling
- Ideas put to Lords Rural Economy Select Committee – tax breaks for Total Transport successes; a new "rural bus grant" – capital assistance for buses used >50% in rural areas
- Local authorities need joined up thinking across functions and get the facts clear on what you can do legally – don't be led by procurement
- Industry needs a national bus policy, long term stability/funding commitments

#### **11. Rural England Community Interest Company**

GB outlined the purpose and background behind RE, for more details please refer to the following link: <https://ruralengland.org/>

GB outlined the recent publication of the State of the Services Report 2018, which presents the most recent evidence regarding the provision of services to residents and businesses in rural England. The report covers 8 service areas which are: Local buses and community transport, Broadband and mobile connectivity, Public library services, Hospitals, Public health services, Young people's services, Shops and online shopping and Personal advice services. To see a full version of the document, please refer to the following link:

<https://ruralengland.org/state-of-rural-services-report-2018/>

RE is also undertaking some work on Rural Fuel Poverty and access to post 16 education.

### **12. The National Conference and Regional Seminars**

This year the Conference will take place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> September hosted by the University of Gloucestershire at their Cheltenham campus. The title for the 2-day event is 'Creating Vibrant Rural Communities'. Two key note speakers have already confirmed their attendance – Lord Gardiner of Kimble, and the Chair of the House of Lords Select Committee into the Rural Economy, Lord Foster of Bath. The focus of the Conference will be the call on the government for a Rural Strategy. The 2 days will include workshops and plenary speakers from local authorities, voluntary and private sector.

7 Regional Seminars are being held this year, which include hot topics from Public Sector Funding to Health and Wellbeing for details please refer to the following link: <https://www.rsonline.org.uk/category/seminars>

GB explained that the seminars are free for RSP members, and encouraged non-local authority partners to attend and participate.

### **13. Any Other Business**

There was no other business and the meeting was closed.

Date of next meeting **19<sup>th</sup> November, 2019**

### **Rural Buses – managing decline or maximizing opportunities?**

Provision of rural bus services is generally in decline. It has long been the case that the majority of services in rural areas have required some form of support beyond the revenue that can be collected through fares. Local authority cuts in the recent era of austerity have hit hard on public transport. Under section 63 of the 1985 Transport Act, authorities must secure the provision of such socially necessary services (not provided commercially by bus operators) as they “consider it appropriate” – there is therefore no requirement to tender for their provision or otherwise provide funding to fill such gaps. Other, statutory, authority expenditure therefore puts pressure on such discretionary spend. Those local authorities that are continuing to support such services are coming under increasing pressure to reduce services where the cost per trip is excessive – in some cases demand is so low that it would be cheaper to provide a free personal taxi for the user when they want to travel.

Several factors are causing this gradual erosion of services. Operating costs are increasing not least in respect of driver wage inflation, fuel prices and insurance. Many smaller family owned rural operations are closing down as the current generation of owners seeks a reliable pension income and the succeeding generation has no interest in perpetuating the business. Reduced reimbursement for the mandatory free carriage of concessionary pass holders, reflecting reducing local authority budgets, has a seriously adverse effect on income. Despite the national policy that operators should be reimbursed so that they are “no better and no worse off” than they would be in the absence of the concessionary scheme, in practice the costs and risks associated with an operator submitting an appeal against the level of reimbursement are such that most small (and many large) operators will be loath to do so.

But the irrefutable problem with rural bus services is a lack of demand. Rural sparsity results in less demand for travel and the reduced facilities now available in many rural settlements, coupled with increased home working and internet-based shopping and leisure, has eroded the case for market town services that previously provided the backbone of local buses. What is needed is a means of strengthening that demand. The “Total Transport” concept has been embraced by many rural authorities, with varying degrees of success, and supported in principle by the Department for Transport. Where authorities look carefully at the commercial network, the bus services they support, the costs and provision of home to school transport, and the community transport networks they assist, it is often the case that greater efficiency can be achieved by combining both the supply and the demand for these and generating a more comprehensive provision of services that is sustainable by the overall demand, thereby creating greater travel opportunities and potentially growing the market. All delivered at reduced cost through partnership working between public and private sector.

However the single greatest source of supply and demand remains, with a few honourable exceptions, largely untapped. Local NHS Trusts spend considerable sums of money providing non-emergency patient transport to get people to and from appointments at hospitals, health surgeries and clinics. These costs are generally small compared with their overall budgets for clinical staff and facility operation, and are therefore frequently overlooked. But provision of these transport services consumes significant resources in a generally inefficient manner and despite their provision, the costs associated with missed or delayed appointments, often attributed to travel problems, remain high. Large areas of land are allocated, even in rural areas, to parking for health facilities with consequent environmental costs and circulating traffic with people searching or waiting for parking

spaces impacts on the wider network and adversely affects bus schedules. This could be addressed in large part by integrating such transport into the Total Transport model. There are further benefits which would arise from a wider provision of public transport achieved through this means – greater social inclusion and reduced loneliness of individuals, which not only would improve their quality of life but would also directly reduce pressure on those same NHS Trusts and help them serve the same population at reduced costs.

However the statistics presented in support of the decline need to be treated with some caution. For instance, every time a local bus services contracted under local authority subsidy changes hands at re-tendering, this results in a service being withdrawn and a service being commenced. But in many cases one or other of these actions will go unrecorded as it will be achieved through the modification of a service registration for the same or similar route operated at a different time. Furthermore, over time operators tend to consolidate service registrations where different registrations cover the same service and this appears to result in service withdrawals whereas in practice nothing changes. We all need to be careful in the use of statistics!

There is much media coverage of “dirty diesels” – and most bus services are provided using diesel vehicles. What is often misunderstood is that different emissions standard apply to light duty vehicles (cars and vans) and heavy-duty vehicles (buses and trucks). The latest light vehicles have to meet the Euro 6 standard which can be passed under laboratory conditions. But heavy vehicles have to pass a more stringent Euro VI standard – and pass it on the road, in everyday use. This Euro VI standard represents a reduction in airborne emissions of up to 99% compared with its Euro V predecessor, so the latest diesel buses and coaches are very clean indeed.

In that context, the decarbonization agenda is focusing largely on major urban areas at present and we must ensure that appropriate rural-proofing takes place if the same objective is placed on rural areas. There are practical issues to consider. An electric bus typically costs up to twice as much as its latest clean diesel (Euro VI) equivalent. But whilst there are limited amounts of the latter on the secondhand market, for operators unable to sustain new purchase costs, there are no secondhand electric buses yet available. Charging stations are a cost that needs to be added to the cost of going electric and under the current electricity supply regime, the costs of connecting your depot to the grid, including any necessary additional substation infrastructure to accommodate increased load on the system, is borne by the customer requiring the supply – in this case the bus operator. But, most importantly, the operating range of electric buses is still considerably lower than that of diesel – at most 150 miles per day, with diesel vehicles capable of twice that. By their nature, rural bus services generally incur greater daily mileage than urban routes and by no means all are suitable for electrification with current technology.

Alternative fuels are also available, and if sufficient supply of biomethane can be secured, this can provide a very clean and environmentally sustainable source of powering buses, with relatively small cost premia compared with diesel. Hydrogen fuel cell vehicles are even cleaner – provided the hydrogen is obtained through the use of sustainable energy – but the cost of the vehicles and infrastructure is largely prohibitive even for urban operations, except through heavily subsidized purchasing competitions.

**So our call to action is for the Government to develop an evidence based Rural Bus Policy that places a duty on (and allocates funding to) local authorities to provide socially necessary rural buses; emphasizes the benefits of Total Transport and mandates its full development potential, and strikes an appropriate balance between environmental benefits of non-fossil fuel transport and sustainable rural public transport.**