



**Minutes for the Rural Services Partnership  
Partner Group Online via Zoom Monday  
25<sup>th</sup> April 2022  
2pm-3pm**

**Present:**

Graham Biggs MBE (Chief Executive, Rural Services Network & Company Secretary RSP) (GB)  
Kerry Booth (Deputy Chief Executive, Rural Services Network) (KB)  
Duncan Carter (Corporate Affairs Manager, Calor) (DC)  
Andy Clowes (Head of Customer Experience & Strategy) (AC)  
Nora Corkery (CEO, Devon Communities Together) (NC)  
Connor Finch (Anglian Water) (CF)  
Rachael Fullwood (Chief Executive, Lincolnshire Rural Housing Association) (RF)  
Jo Giles (Customer Safeguarding Senior Manager, Cadent Ltd) (JG)  
Nik Harwood (Chief Executive, Young Somerset & Director RSP) (NH)  
David Inman (Corporate Director of Rural Services Network & Director RSP) (DI)  
Jo Martin (Founder, Rural Business Network) (JM)  
Fay Morris (SMP Net Zero Engagement Manager, SP Energy Networks) (FM)  
Amanda Phillips (Priority Services Partnership & Engagement Lead, United Utilities) (AP)  
Nadine Trout (Member Development & Support Manager, Rural Services Network) (NT)  
  
Bethan Aldridge (minute-taker) (BA)

The Chair, Nik Harwood, welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**1. Apologies for Absence**

Lydia Allen (Policy & Advocacy Manager, National Youth Agency)  
John Birtwistle (Head of Policy, First Bus)  
Ian Cass (Managing Director, Form of British Pubs)  
Sophia Haywood (Director of Public Affairs, Liquid Gas UK)  
Beth Kennedy (CS Partnership Manager, Anglian Water)  
Rev Richard Kirlew (Chairman of the Agricultural Chaplaincy Association)  
Christine Lally (County Officer, Oxfordshire Assoc. of Local Councils)  
Rita Lawson (Chief Executive, Tees Valley Rural Action)  
Shelagh Meldrum (Chief Officer, Yeovil District Hospital)  
David Rogers (Executive Cttee member, Oxfordshire Assoc. of Local Councils)  
Kay Sentence (Trustee, Thame CLT)  
Ian Sherriff (Academic Partnership lead for Dementia, University of Plymouth)  
Elizabeth Warwick (Stakeholder Engagement Manager, West & Wales Utilities)  
Hastoe Housing Association (whole team)  
Pub is the Hub (whole team)  
Shropshire Fire & Rescue Service (whole team)

**2. Minutes of Previous Meeting** (See [link to Minutes and Papers](#))

Minutes of the previous meeting 06.12.21 were accepted as a true record.

**3. Matters arising:**

None were raised.

**4. RSP Plans for the year ahead** ([see Presentation](#))

NH gave a presentation on behalf of the Rural Services Partnership Ltd.

NH discussed the key core fundamentals that the RSP strives to achieve and deliver on to members. There are a number of [seminars and events](#) this year that RSP members can attend. NH also emphasised the importance and relevance of the information in the weekly Rural Bulletin and to share it around members' organisations. Click on the link to find out more about the RSP's [policy research](#).

He also stressed that it was important too for Partners to engage with RSP so that it can improve and amplify the rural voice. The breadth and diversity of membership is really important too and NH asked Partners to share their stories/research with the RSP. The power of the story is just as important as the stats, data, research etc.

**Action:** If Partners have case studies etc. on what it's like to "be rural" in 2022, coming out of the pandemic and its impact, cost-of living crisis etc then please email:

[admin@sparse.gov.uk](mailto:admin@sparse.gov.uk)

For those members who would like to attend the conference in September, it will be on-line again and [tickets are available on Eventbrite here](#).

GB further expanded on some of the items in NH's presentation. These included:

a) Local Government Finance settlement, there is some doubt as to when a review will take place so is still potentially a major piece of work for the us.

b) Adult Social Care Reform White Paper, some discussions already taken place with Ministers. The DHSC is trying to understand the cost of delivering care and has a questionnaire out with County and Unitary authorities to capture data on the costs they are facing in their care responsibilities. There has been some extra money for social care but not enough to keep pace with increased numbers of clients etc.

c) Levelling up White Paper with technical appendix, RSN has produced a [Rural Lens review](#) on this and is working with economic consultants, Pragmatix, on the metrics in the White Paper from a rural perspective and they are looking into the challenge points and whether they are the right ones or don't show the true rural picture.

d) UK Shared Prosperity Fund, at first glance, the allocations are not looking too bad from a rural perspective. RSN produced a [Rural Lens review on the fund](#) (early May) and appointed another firm of consultants to do a study on the cost-of-living from a rural context.

e) Off-grid gas network conversion to non-fossil fuels, the RSN provides the secretariat for the [APPG on Rural Services](#), and we are hoping to have a minister attend our next meeting in June to discuss the impact on rural homes or the unfairness of converting boilers to non-fossil fuel nine years earlier than on-grid areas.

f) Planning proposals, waiting to see what they will be. There was a brief reference in the Levelling up White Paper that in effect the government acknowledged it still

needed to do those.

**5. Networking/Discussion on topics impacting on RSP members currently.**

NC – looking at developing a whole society approach to resilience and setting up a working group across Devon, Plymouth, and Torbay. GB commented that the RSN would be interested in the work output and be very happy to promote it across the network.

JG - is working on a safeguarding innovation approach and Cadent and Northern Gas Networks have awarded a contract to Catapult for some Innovation Research which links across the different approaches that are needed to be successful when it comes to people who are classed as digitally excluded. Hoping to create a matrix of best communication routes and methods for different situations and scenarios re digital exclusion. There's a big overlap with rural as well when looking at broadband, isolation, and loneliness. Would like to come back to the group to ask for support to possibly extend that research/test the research but ultimately will have some exacting outcomes on how we can collectively respond to digital exclusion with a national approach.

FM – interested in JG's research work as these feed into the joint PSR work SP Energy Networks is undertaking with other utility companies in the Plas Madoc, Wrexham community area. Looking to pull together communal information and again working with people who don't have access to the internet etc. FM happy to share their learning points with JG and others. JG agreed and offered the opportunity to chat this through. AP is also working with Cadent and Northern Gas and would be very happy to work with SP Energy Networks too on this joint approach.

Also, FM would like to hear from anyone who is working on any projects etc that will have a capacity/demand impact on the SP Energy Network as the sooner her network is aware of it the better they can plan capacity eg EV charging for local communities etc.

AP - wanted to discuss if the RSN could offer some help in getting the Utility Companies' message across through its different networks eg parish councils. There is currently a big emphasis on getting more of the right type of customers on the Priorities Service Register (PSR) - it's not just a case of customers who want their bills in a different format etc anymore. Utility companies are working more with Local Resilience Forums eg drought/floods etc, but they lose time getting to customers because they don't know who those priority customers are and they don't know about the PSR or consider themselves as vulnerable. Looking at preventative strategies or at the very least getting ready to support these customers. JG agreed that it would be good to promote the fact that the utility companies can be proactive and supportive.

GB commented that he thought it would be better if there was direct communication from the utility company to the parish and town councils in their areas as the best option and RSN would add its name to that. These are very good routes to getting the information out into the communities as they are a trusted local organisation. RSN has recently done some work for South East Water on how engagement can take place and

what works best in rural areas. AC agreed that he had put a few articles into the weekly newsletter about the PSR. AC also noted that from the work done with RSN there was no “cookie-cutter” way of engagement, so the challenge is to find different ways of engaging with local communities as well eg sponsorship with local town councils – seed money to help them to get the message out and provided access from a vulnerability, affordability, and water efficiency perspective. NC suggested producing a generic message and then asking other rural Organisations to use their communication channels/networks to cascade that message across eg part of a regular newsletters and so it’s not another random email.

**Action:** GB agreed to discuss this further and how to send a generic message/special bulletin to RSN’s distribution list on behalf of the utility companies and that if anyone was having problems to contact their water/gas/electricity company directly etc. It could also include the power cut number 105 as it doesn’t matter which DNO you are with.

RF – noted that her organisation has appointed a resident engagement assistant to work on various project work to engage with residents. One of these projects is to contact all residents and identify who their utilities providers are, raise awareness of price increases, meter readings and affordability concerns etc. Majority of residents on electric hearing, so monitoring when contracts are due to finish and building this into a future contract plan by being proactive. RF would like a co-ordinated approach with other Organisations to support their residents.

DC – working with some rural MPs to organise a Parliamentary Debate to raise awareness that the deal for rural people must be fair and that low carbon heating solutions are available for all homes and are affordable. Commissioned work to look at the impact on fuel poverty on some of the current proposals. Also aware that the early experiences of consumers converting to other hearing solutions must be positive otherwise the transition to net zero will become much harder. GB agreed that RSN is using the parliamentary process, backbench debates, questions to ministers etc but it all depends on whatever has happened on that day in the news etc. on whether it gets picked up.

## **6. Any Other Business**

No items were brought forward.

## **7. Close**

NH thanked everyone for attending the meeting today which closed at 3pm.