

MINUTES OF THE SPARSE RURAL AND RURAL SERVICES NETWORK EXECUTIVE, MONDAY 23rd JUNE 2014

Present:- Cllr Cecilia Motley (Chairman) Cllr Robert Heseltine (First Vice Chair) Cllr Lewis Strange, Cllr Peter Stevens, Cllr Mary Robinson (substitute for Cllr G Nicholson) John Birtwistle (Transport) Officers :- Graham Biggs (Chief Executive), Jane Hart

Apologies:- Cllr Gordon Nicholson, Richard Kirlew (Church in Wales - Community), Cllr Hilary Carrick, Cllr Alex Folkes, Stewart Horne (Business), Cllr Peter Thornton, Cllr Derrick Haley, David Inman

The Chair, Cecilia Motley, welcomed those present and formally opened the meeting.

1. Minutes of the Executive of 27th January 2014

These were agreed as a correct record.

2a. Budget Report

The Chief Executive presented the budget report which was in a slightly revised format and incorporated known changes for 2014/15 and 2015/16. The revised format was supported. Subject to meeting assumed income targets a positive balance is predicted for this year and next. However, income levels cannot be assumed with certainty and must be carefully monitored. Graham Biggs and David Inman would shortly be holding further discussions to identify areas where budget savings could be made should that prove necessary.

A bid has been submitted to the Home Office Police Innovation Fund to help establish the National Rural Crime Network with 2 years pump priming finance to match contributions from 28 Police and Crime Commissioners across England and Wales.

2b. Membership Variations

The Chief Executive expressed disappointment that Wiltshire Council had resigned from membership despite gaining some £1 million p.a. as a result of RSN's fairer funding activities. The Chair agreed to write to their Leader. It was also noted that the budget reflected Wiltshire leaving.

Mendip have also given notice of their intention to leave but their request to allow them to leave early (in 2015) was not agreed to..

7 new members have joined the Rural Assembly to date.

3. Constitution

The Chief Executive reported that Melton District Council had previously raised concerns about the wording of the constitution although the precise nature of their concerns was unclear. It was thought that perhaps there had been a misunderstanding about the RSP's strong continuing commitment to financial work.

The constitution would be presented to the AGM as required.

4. The Rural Conference

The Chief Executive advised that this year's Rural Conference (to be held on 9th September in Chester) will be run jointly by the LGA and RSN. Owen Paterson has agreed to be the key note speaker.

As it will be a 1 day conference for the first time it is difficult to predict likely attendance levels. There had been complicated discussions about the financial arrangements but agreement had ultimately been reached that the LGA would take the first £7,000 of profit and that, after deducting the conference organisers' fee of £2,000, profit would be split 50:50. In the event of a loss that would be split 80:20 (LGA taking the 80%).

5. Fairer Funding Programme 2015/16 Settlement

The Chief Executive reported that there had been some recognition of the additional costs of rural service provision in the funding formula but the problem of damping meant that very little of this had actually reached rural Councils. However, as a result of the fairer funding campaign, £8.5 million had been provided for a specific set of very rural councils through 'Efficiency Support for Services in Sparse Areas' (ESSSA) in 2013/14. The Rural Service Delivery Grant that replaced ESSA (and which is now included in the formula as a separate grant) was originally set at £9.5 million in 2014/15 but was subsequently raised to £11.5million.

The frequent changes to complex funding systems complicate year- on- year comparisons.

DCLG has commissioned LG Futures to undertake a study into the additional costs of providing rural services. The first stage report is expected this September which is unfortunately too late to affect the 2015/16 settlement although it is hoped that Rural Service Delivery Grant might increase.

Graham Stuart is continuing to press Ministers with the 'Rural Fair Shares' campaign and has indicated his intention to approach all MPs whose areas lost out to damping. It was also noted that some journalists have begun to recognise the existence pockets of severe deprivation in rural and coastal areas.

There was discussion about the rate of economic improvement being slower in rural areas than in urban centres and comment that, whilst there might be some improvement in employment levels, rural wages are still low. Also, various recent changes, such as Business Rates retention and the New Homes Bonus, benefited urban areas more than rural. Thus the already skewed urban rural financial gap continues to grow. Mention was also made of the particular problems facing tourist areas in relation to the costs of providing health care.

The central issue of the unfairness in funding was re-emphasised and Graham Biggs confirmed that he would be writing directly to the Minister after 1st July. The executive will be afforded the opportunity to comment on a draft of that letter.

6. Programme for APPGs

The Chief Executive explained that there had been a move to afternoon meetings which he hoped would be more convenient for MPs. This year there will be some options for MPs to sit down and discuss focused issues, such a rural housing, transport and health, directly with rural councillors. There would be an increased emphasis on clarifying desired actions and outcomes.

7. Independent Growth and the Future of Public Services in Non-Metropolitan England

The Chief Executive indicated his intention to add to the draft response and then to ensure that it is circulated to the executive for further comment. [Paper circulated 24 June]. It was agreed that the Chair and the Chief Executive be given delegated powers to respond.

8. Transport Group

The Chief Executive made reference to the circulated report and advised that he anticipated that the group would have only infrequent meetings, and perhaps an annual APPG, but that members would communicate and share good practice electronically. John Birtwistle thought the group could have immediate success and indicated that he would be happy to promote it.

A number of transport related issues were raised including public use of school buses, 16+ transport to education/ training, the opaque nature of concessionary fare funding, challenges facing community transport and alternative bus service funding options.

It was agreed that:

- the group should comprise operators, local users and Local Authority representatives
- operators invited to the introductory meeting could include those from outside Sparse provided that they run at least some of their services in rural areas, and
- Membership of the group and subsequent participation (after the initial meeting) to be limited to those in RSP membership.

9. Manifesto Development

The Chief Executive advised that there had been a desk-top consideration of the EFRA Select Committee report and the Government's repose to it as well as consultation with the membership. Work will now start on drafting the manifesto. Topics for inclusion are likely to be planning and land use; affordable housing and housing affordability; fairer funding; rural transport; health access and funding; older people; fuel poverty; viable local services (shops , pubs etc.); broadband; economic development rural proofing.

It is intended to first trawl officer views and then to consult with the membership on the main calls. A final version will be presented to the AGM on 17 November with publicity to follow in early December.

10. Our Programme (30 Services Leaflet)

This leaflet, which aims to assist recruitment and retention by providing a reminder of the many services provided, is to be circulated to the Executive within the next week [circulated 23 June].

11. Government Transformation Fund

The Chief Executive explained that much of this fund, for service and/or organisational change, is targeted specifically at smaller District Councils. Often those Councils find it difficult to enter competitive processes with bigger authorities.

The first round closes on 1st July and there will be a report to members once the allocations have been made public.

12. Reports Back

a. Unitaries Group- This group has only been in existence for about 6 months but is already making progress. The next meeting is on 10th July, 2014

b. Fire Group- Last met in the late autumn and seeking to ensure that financial concerns of Fire Services are input to the DCLG/Defra study.

c. Rural Engand- Community Interest Company (CIC) has been established with Graham Biggs and David Inman as Directors (Andy Dean, Brian Wilson and Jane Hart to be added later)and the steering

group met in the previous week. An application for funding is being submitted to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Calor have agreed to be lead sponsors providing £10,000 funding and have agreed to promote the group to other private sector companies.

d. Rural Crime Network- The group is now established and has terms of reference. North Yorkshire Police Commissioner's Office are to hold the funds if the bid to the Police Transformation Fund is successful. 28 PCCs have joined each paying £2,000 for two year's membership. Secretarial and support services are to be provided by RSN through a Service Level Agreement.

e. Rural Housing Alliance- Andy Dean and Graham Biggs are meeting with the Chair of the Alliance on 1st July before the APPG.

f. Rural Health Network. Has been established and the second Rural Health Conference will be held early in the new year.

There was then a discussion about opportunities to make links with AONBs and it was agreed that Peter Stevens would approach them.

13. Other Business

The Chief Executive read out an email from David Inman which advised that 40 District Councillors and 400 Parish Councillors had agreed to participate on rural sounding boards. It was agreed initially to amalgamate the two together into a single sounding board.

Cecilia Motley raised the seemingly complex situation regarding proposed payments to postmasters and postmistresses. It was agreed that she would send details to Graham Biggs and that an additional item on Post Offices be included on the agenda for the 14th July Rural Assembly meeting. A representative from the National Federation of Sub-postmasters to be invited to the November meeting.

The chair declared the meeting closed at 14.10