

Notes of SPARSE Rural Special Interest Group meeting – 16th November 2015

Title:	SPARSE Rural Special Interest Group
Date:	Monday 16 th November 2015 commencing at 11.15 a.m.
Venue:	Westminster Suite, 8th Floor, Local Government House, Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ

Attendance

Attendance is included in the minutes of the main SPARSE Rural Assembly Sub SIG meeting which followed directly after this meeting,

Item	Decisions and actions	Action
1	Election of Chairman for the ensuing year Cllr Cecilia Motley, Shropshire CC, (Chair) thanked members for their support in extending her position for a further year.	
2	Election of Vice Chairs for the ensuing year Members noted the list of Vice Chairs, and raised concerns that representation from the south east and south west should also be considered. Action: Eligible existing Vice-Chairs be re-appointed and there be the creation of 2 additional vacancies for Vice-Chairs to address geographical issues with the appointments thereto being made at the next meeting.	
3	Election of First Vice Chair Cllr Motley nominated Cllr Robert Heseltine, North Yorkshire as First Vice Chair. The nomination was agreed by members.	
4	Constitution Members accepted the planned revised Constitution put before the meeting.	
5	Minutes of the last SPARSE Rural Sub SIG- 13th July 2015 The Minutes of the previous SPARSE Rural Sub SIG were approved. Members noted that Cllr Janet Duncton, West Sussex CC had been in attendance. Action: Amend attendance to include Cllr Duncton.	

6 Fairer Funding Campaign

Dan Bates from Pixel was present for this item and answered questions from members. Members received an update on work to convince the government to honour its commitment to ensure that rural communities receive fairer funding for provision of public services. A letter had recently been sent to Greg Clark MP signed by 59 MPs making the case and requesting a meeting.

Members noted the verbal report and also approved the commissioning of the work on business rates set out in the proposal from Pixel circulated with the agenda.

7 Full Business Rate Retention by Local Authorities

The Group discussed issues around business rate retention and the diversities between urban and rural areas. There would be new duties and responsibilities to the tune of some £10bn - £13bn which as yet, had not been clarified and these needed to be addressed in advance of the transition to avoid inefficiencies.

There were concerns about whether redistribution of business rates would be done in a fair and transparent way to include those in rural areas which might have greater difficulty in exercising their ability to counteract appeals and avoidance of payment. In particular, issues were raised with regard to the ability to attract businesses to areas where infrastructure and transport links were not ideal. It was also essential that the equalisation proposals fully took account of the extra costs in serving rural areas.

Members agreed it was vital that local MPs were sufficiently informed with enough evidence of these and other difficulties so that they could promote their constituencies and ensure Government take into account the rural aspect. It was noted that there was a massive role here for the RSN.

The Group noted the report and agreed to take forward members' suggestions. They reiterated the need to lobby Government for a fair and favourable baseline funding for rural areas.

8 Performance

Members noted the Rural Services Network Performance Report.

9 Speaker:- Graham Stuart MP, Chair of the Parliamentary Rural Fair Share Campaign.

The Chair welcomed Graham Stuart MP, Chair of the Parliamentary Rural Fair Share Campaign.

He updated members on work in campaigning for fairer funding for their areas, including the introduction (with assistance from RSN) of a website for this purpose, correspondence with the Secretary of State and engagement with some 130 MPs from rural areas who had formed a parliamentary rural fair share group.

Members referred to examples of partnership working and risks in competing for businesses in order to attain their business rates. They

would need to align incentives in order to build and continue partnerships for the best interest of the local community – it was felt that there could be a risk that co-operation might reduce with the competition.

There were also concerns about negotiations on devolution and the impact upon unitary authorities. Members agreed that the cost of new burdens would be greater to those in rural areas and that consultations needed to be taken early in the process in order to avoid an unfair disadvantage at the start.

Graham Stuart agreed that there were complications and issues which needed to be addressed at an early stage, however he hoped that these would be resolved, with further consultation and in time.

The Chair thanked the Speaker and moved on to the meeting of the SPARSE Rural Assembly Sub SIG and the meeting of the Rural Services Network.