



**Meeting of THE RURAL ASSEMBLY Sub SIG  
(incorporating SPARSE Rural Members, Rural Assembly Members and  
the Rural Services Partnership Meeting)**

**Venue:- Smith Square Rooms 1 & 2, Local Government House, Smith Square,  
London SW1P 3HZ**

**Date: Monday 11<sup>th</sup> April 2016**

**Time: 12.30 pm to 3.15 pm**

1. **Apologies for absence**
2. **Minutes** of the last Rural Assembly meeting – 16<sup>th</sup> November 2015  
(Attachment 1)
3. **Minutes** of the last Executive meeting – 18<sup>th</sup> January 2016  
(Attachment 2)
4. **Budget Report for 2015/16 and 2016/17**  
(Attachment 3 to follow)
5. **Mains Gas Supply Networks in Rural Areas.**  
Cllr Rosemary Doyle to present.
6. **Rural Services Network Events**
  - a) **The Rural Conference**  
To discuss the plans for 2016
  - b) **2015-16 Rural Services Network Seminar Programme**  
Graham Biggs to report (Attachment 4 – draft Seminar Report)
7. **Devolution: to discuss the attached draft Policy Briefing Paper and thereby establish RSN Policy on Devolution**  
(Attachment 5)

Providing a voice for rural communities and service providers

David Inman, Director Kilworthy Park, Tavistock, Devon PL19 0BZ  
Tel: 01822 813693

[www.rsonline.org.uk](http://www.rsonline.org.uk) email: [admin@sparse.gov.uk](mailto:admin@sparse.gov.uk) twitter: @rsonline



**8. Rural Sounding Board**

To discuss the results of the recent Principal Council and Parish Council Sounding Boards to date.

**9. Widening the Sounding Boards**

To discuss the plans for the future.

**10. Report on the RSP Service Groups**

- (a) Housing
- (b) Health
- (c) Crime
- (d) Fire
- (e) Transport

**11. Housing Bill – An Update on the Current Position**

Monica Burns, National Housing Federation, to present.

**12. LEPs and Rural Areas**

Andy Dean to present.

**13. Any Other Business**

Providing a voice for rural communities and service providers

David Inman, Director Kilworthy Park, Tavistock, Devon PL19 0BZ  
Tel: 01822 813693

[www.rsonline.org.uk](http://www.rsonline.org.uk) email: [admin@sparse.gov.uk](mailto:admin@sparse.gov.uk) twitter: @rsonline

## Notes of Rural Assembly Group meeting - 16<sup>th</sup> November 2015

---

**Title:** Rural Assembly Group  
**Date:** Monday 16<sup>th</sup> November 2015 beginning at 1 p.m.  
**Venue:** Westminster Suite, 8th Floor, Local Government House, Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ

---

### Attendance

An attendance list is attached as **Appendix A** to this note

Item	Decisions and actions	Action
1	<b>Apologies for absence</b> Members noted apologies for the meeting.	
2	<b>Constitution</b> Members agreed to recommend the adoption of the revised Constitution which now reflected the Group's change in structure.  At this point, the meeting was adjourned for the inaugural AGM of the Rural Services Network Special Interest Group.	
3	<b>Election of a Chairman and any Vice Chairman</b> Members agreed re-election of the Chairman, Cllr Cecilia Motley and Vice-Chairman, Cllr Robert Heseltine.	
4	<b>Minutes of the last full meeting- 13th July 2015</b> The minutes of the last full meeting were agreed subject to an amendment to include Cllr Janet Duncton, West Sussex CC who had previously been omitted from the attendance.	
5	<b>Minutes of the last Executive meeting- 14th September 2015</b> The minutes of the last Executive meeting were noted.	
6	<b>Minutes of the last Rural Unitary Councils Group - 28th September 2015</b> Members noted a summary of the outcome of the meeting of the Rural Unitary Councils Community Group from Graham Biggs, RSN.  It was agreed that the group had a meaningful role and that it should have a rolling Chairmanship of 6 months. Members noted that a paper on the lack of Broadband in rural areas, to be presented to the Treasury, would follow for information. Unfortunately, there had not been an opportunity to present a document on Rural Health and Well-being services as was referenced at that meeting	

**7 Membership (Constitutional Requirement)**

Members noted current membership of the Rural Assembly, recognising them as the only named organisation standing up for rural issues. 154 local authorities are currently in membership, with links to over 9000 parishes and 4000 schools.

The Chair thanked David Inman, RSN and colleagues for all their hard work recruiting to the Assembly.

**8 Budget 2014/15 and 2015/16 (Constitutional Requirement)**

Members noted the budget report and the prospect of a reasonably healthy out-turn. It would be important however, to ensure that subs were paid on time in order to balance the books at the end of the year.

**9 RSN Services and Schedule of Meetings for 2015 (Constitutional Requirement)**

Members agreed the dates of future meetings.

**10 Rural Conference**

Members received a presentation from Graham Biggs on arrangements for the Rural Conference, September 2016.

It was felt that largely the Conference had been a very successful event. Those members of RSN team who had been involved were very much thanked. Another conference would be held at the same venue in September 2016 and the University of Gloucestershire were thanked for all their help and assistance.

Members discussed their experiences from the previous conferences and raised a few points of detail. Some members had commented that they had felt somewhat isolated being apart from other members as the day was on the University campus and suggestions were made to try and organise a conference hotel in the future, so that some group sessions could carry on there. There had also been a few comments on domestic issues and it was agreed to review the issues highlighted before the next one.

**11 Rural Sounding Board**

David Inman, Rural Services Network, updated members on the outcomes of the Rural Sounding Board survey asking about the impact on services of the financial cut backs. This was a repeat of a survey undertaken in 2014 and the situation had altered with more feeling that the cut backs were having an impact on the quality of services.

Members were pleased that there had been a good response from local authority and parish councillors. It was agreed the same survey would be done from April to June 2016 with the results being reported back to the July meeting. Here is the link to the survey:

<http://www.rsonline.org.uk/best-practice/rural-sounding-board>

**Action:** Circulate Survey for information **David Inman**

## **12 Issues Facing Rural Housing Associations**

The Chair welcomed Jo Lavis, Director of Rural Housing Solutions who provided a presentation to the group on provision of affordable housing within current constraints.

Her presentation outlined ways in which, through working together, and with available resources, policies could be developed to help deliver affordable housing in rural areas. Members heard how, by bringing stakeholders together to create collaborative partnerships, and using their expertise, capacity could be strengthened in order to achieve mutual goals.

Members discussed concerns, thanking the Speaker for her presentation and requested that it be available on the website.

**Action:** To place presentation on Rural Services Network **David Inman**

## **13 Buses Bill Briefing**

The Group noted a briefing on the Buses Bill which contained two main provisions which would enable local authorities to take up more direct transport powers.

Members referred to existing voluntary partnership agreements and agreed that this would provide better opportunities to enable more innovative ways of providing commercially viable services.

The Bill was due to become law in 2017.

## **14 Julia Mulligan**

The Chair welcomed Julia Mulligan, Chair, National Rural Crime Network and the Police and Crime Commissioner for North Yorkshire.

Julia summarised the work of the National Rural Crime Network, to raise the profile of the effects of crime in rural areas which are often underestimated and under-reported.

She outlined challenges in ensuring provision of quantitative funding and providing services across large, sparsely populated geographical areas that are often more costly than in urban areas.

Members heard that, whilst the volume of crime in rural areas is very often lower than in urban locations, its consequences can be equally impactful and undermine feelings of personal safety. The aim of the Network is to improve understanding of these issues and address the difficulties around provision of vital services.

Discussion continued about ways of sharing back office functions in order to address lack of funding and finding better ways of working via other shared services and logistics. Members agreed that raising public confidence in the police forces was a key issue and part of this was due to

heavy bureaucratic processes.

The Chair thanked the Speaker for a very interesting presentation.

**15 Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

The meeting was closed at 3 25 p.m.

**Attendance at meetings 16 November 2015**

Cecilia Motley – Chair RSN  
James MacColl – Better Transport UK  
Graham Biggs – Chief Executive RSN  
John Birtwistle – Head of Policy, First Group PLC  
David Inman – Corporate Director RSN  
Gordon Nicolson OBE – Eden District Council  
Helen Briggs – Chief Executive, Rutland County Council  
Cllr Owen Bierley – West Lindsey District Council  
Cllr Yvonne Peacock – Richmondshire District Council  
Cllr David Godfrey – Shepway District Council  
Frances Bedding – Suffolk County Council  
Cllr Janet Duncton – West Sussex County Council  
Cllr David Ireton – Craven District Council  
Cllr Jeremy Savage – South Norfolk District Council  
Cllr Pam Posnett – Melton Borough Council  
John Birtwistle – Head of Policy, First Group PLC  
Cllr Lindsey Cawrey – North Kesteven District Council  
Cllr Peter Stevens – St Edmundsbury Borough Council  
Paul Over – Executive Director, Chichester District Council  
James MacColl – Better Transport UK  
Cllr Mike Ellis – Bradford Metropolitan District Council  
Cllr Les Kew – Bath & North East Somerset Council  
Revd Richard Kirlew Mr Hugh McCarthy – Wycombe District Council  
Liz Philip – Executive Principal, Askham Bryan College  
Cllr Jane Mortimer – Scarborough Borough Council  
Cllr Roger Begy – Rutland County Council  
Cllr Cameron Clark – Sevenoaks District Council  
Cllr Sue Sanderson – Cumbria County Council  
Cllr Robert Heseltine – North Yorkshire County Council  
Cllr Yvonne Peacock – Richmondshire District Council  
Cllr John Clarke – Gedling Borough Council  
Cllr N Daubney – King’s Lynn and West Norfolk Council  
Cllr Rosemary Doyle – Canterbury City Council  
William Jacobs – Head of Finance, Vale of White Horse District Council  
Fatima de Abreu – Member Services, LGA

**Speakers**

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

Jo Lavis - Director of Rural Housing Solutions

Julia Mulligan, Chair – National Rural Crime Network and the Police and Crime Commission for North Yorkshire

**Apologies List for Rural Assembly AGM - 16<sup>th</sup> November 2015**

Cllr Roy Miller – Barnsley Council  
Cllr Peter Martin – Surrey County Council  
Deborah Clarke – ACRE?  
Cllr Henry – Gateshead Council  
Cllr Adam Paynter – Cornwall Council

Kevin Larner – Countryside & Communities Manager, Cherwell District Council  
Richard Quallington – Interim Chief Executive, ACRE  
Cllr Andre Gonzalez de Savage – Northamptonshire County Council  
Cllr Hazel Brand – Bassetlaw District Council  
Richard Bates – Head of Finance, Dorset County Council  
Cllr I Seccombe – Warwickshire County Council  
Cllr Carole Clarke – South Northamptonshire Council  
Cllr Colin Noble – Leader, Suffolk County Council  
Cllr B Pain – Harborough District Council  
Steve Jordan – Executive Director, South Hams District Council  
Lawrence Conway – South Lakeland District Council  
Adam Norburn – Chief Executive, Rugby Borough Council  
Lisa Buckle – West Devon Borough Council/South Hams District Council  
Jim Graham – Chief Executive, Warwickshire County Council  
Cllr Bob Adams – South Kesteven District Council  
Kath Hemmings – Neighbourhood Manager, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council  
Grant Black – Rural Media  
Nic Millington – Rural Media  
Ruth Hawkins – Nottingham Healthcare NHS Trust  
Steward Horne – Business Information Point  
Martin Rehorn – Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service  
Steve Mackenzie – Chief Executive, Purbeck District Council  
Peter Shipp – EYMS Group Ltd  
Will Smith – Stagecoach in Norfolk  
Cllr Peter Bedford – Boston Borough Council  
Brian Wilson – Brian Wilson Associates  
Jim Onions – Cumbria Fire & Rescue Service  
Cllr Hazel Brand – Bassetlaw District Council  
Cllr Anthony Alford – West Dorset District Council  
Ian Richardson – Chief Executive, Shropshire Rural Housing Association  
Cllr Margaret Squires – Mid Devon District Council  
Cllr Michael Hicks – South Hams District Council  
Cllr Neil Butters – Bath & North East Somerset Council  
Cllr Liz Sneath – South Holland District Council  
Sue Williams – Berkshire College of Agriculture  
Cllr Peter Thornton – South Lakeland District Council  
Cllr Nigel Manning – Guildford Borough Council  
Donna Smith – Frontline Project Manager, Plunkett Foundation  
Cllr Madge Shineton – Shropshire Council  
Cllr Heather Bainbridge – Mid Devon District Council  
Peter Vaughan – Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service



**MINUTES OF THE SPARSE RURAL AND RURAL SERVICES NETWORK EXECUTIVE, MONDAY  
18<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY, 2016 HELD AT THE LGA, SMITH SQUARE, LONDON**

**Present:- Cllr Cecilia Motley (Chair) Cllr Robert Heseltine (First Vice Chair), Cllr Peter Stevens,  
Cllr Gordon Nicolson, Cllr Peter Thornton, Cllr Sue Sanderson (Observer), John Birtwistle  
(Transport).**

**Officers: - Graham Biggs (Chief Executive), David Inman (Director), Andy Dean.**

**Apologies: - Cllr Roger Begy, Cllr Derrick Haley, Cllr Adam Paynter, Cllr Janet Duncton.**

Cllr Begy had been unwell and the Executive asked to send him their best wishes for a speedy recovery.

Cornwall Council would be written to see if there was a possibility of a Deputy also being appointed for Cllr Paynter.

**1. Minutes of the Executive of 14<sup>th</sup> September 2015**

- (1) The review of funding for Police Authorities had been deferred for a year.
- (2) The legal housing decision involving West Berkshire had been appealed by the Government.

**2. Provisional Settlement**

The situation was considered in detail. A settlement for 2016/17 and a profile settlement over 4 years had been set out through to 2019-20. Although RSDG was programmed to increase to £65.0 million by 2019-20 (back end loaded) cuts had been calculated on a new definition of Spending Power (core Spending Power) which included Council Tax. As Council Tax levels in rural Authority were higher, on average) than in urban areas the reductions proposed were consequently significantly higher in rural areas than urban areas. (Previously cut backs had been at a uniform percentage). Lincolnshire felt the loss to Shire Counties overall would be over £240 million. It was also felt surprising that this had only become apparent when the figures were examined in detail. No paragraphs in the settlement document had actually detailed this. Rural MPs were incensed.

- (a) A petition signed by 50 MPs had been sent to the Prime Minister (cc Chancellor and Communities Secretary).
- (b) RSN hoped to get, through Shropshire Council, a joint letter to the Prime Minister signed by the Leaders of a number of Counties/Unitaries.
- (c) A Back Bench debate which had involved some 40 MPs being critical of the Provisional Settlement had been held on the 11<sup>th</sup> January. The film of this and the Hansard extract would be circulated to all members with the message for Authorities to get or keep their MPs involved.
- (d) Graphs showing comparison member Authority to urban Authority were being prepared and would, it was hoped, be sent out on the week of the 18<sup>th</sup> January.
- (e) The consultation response sent in by Sparse Rural and the Rural Fire Group was detailed.
- (f) It was understood the Government wanted the matter concluded by the 11<sup>th</sup> February so there was very limited time to try to get this changed.

(g) All Authorities would be asked to provide to the RSN evidence of their service cuts and their hardship areas as part of this process. It was felt regrettable that the overall picture which would be produced could only be one from 80% of the rural areas of England because of the intransigence of authorities in the other 20% who continued to refuse to be involved with RSN.

(h) Authority was given to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Chair to take such further action as may be considered necessary.

### **3. New Homes Bonus**

The draft response to the New Homes Bonus Consultation was approved with minor amendments, Delegated authority was given to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chair, to agree the final version in case further changes became necessary.

### **4. The Business Rate Based System**

The Chief Executive outlined the position. For rural areas the equalisation system and the level of tariffs/top ups would be the key factor. The review of needs to be built into the new systems would be absolutely fundamental as this is where sparsity costs would feature. A massive amount of work on members' behalf was envisaged over the coming years.

It was decided to commission research to a sum of £5k from L G Futures mapping previous evidence on the sparsity situation and seeking to comment on the impact of sparsity in super sparse and average sparse areas to seek to avoid cliff edges. Work in relation to Pixel already commissioned was outlined.

### **5. Budget Report 2015/16 – 2016/17 and Conference Budget**

The Chief Executive detailed the position which was complicated by 15 Local Authorities and 5 RSP organisations which had not paid to date. However, it was hoped a balance in the region of £17k could be taken forward to 2016/17. In that year the budget was still tighter with a balance of £7k estimated to go forward to 2017/18.

Graham also presented the Conference Budget which for 2015/16 showed a small surplus. Complimentary remarks continued to be received about the Conference.

The Chief Executive stressed that the rest of the Agenda showed how the organisation would have to reposition itself to show the widest possible brief over the next few difficult years. It was decided that the next Executive in September would be a full day one which would include a 'Blue Sky Thinking' session.

### **6. A Rural Information Exchange**

A report was received on this important area that needed to be developed.

Three Knowledge Hubs had been developed:

- Local Government Finance
- Performance and Transformation
- Rural Service Delivery

Three further ones were planned:

- Planning and Communities
- Rural Economic Development
- Rural Housing

Long term Social Care and Education would need to be looked at.

In terms of conveying information, 6 member contact lists and 22 officer contact lists had been established. The information from the various bulletins sent out would now be reinforced by the use of this system.

## **7. Expansion of the Community Group**

- (i) This report detailed how the Group's links in the communities of member Authorities could be expanded over the coming years. The present system that had an estimated reach of some 50,000 contacts, it was hoped to take that figure to a six figure one – an eventual target of 250,000 had been identified.

Information would be sought on:-

- Village Hall Committees
- Details of local village Pubs and shops
- Details of any Youth Clubs and Scout Groups
- Details of any Parish Council or community website in the hope of working in liaison with them.
- Details of volunteers for Sounding Boards (see next report)

A call was made for RSN to look to supplement the information contained on the ONS website where it was believed there was a profile of every individual parish in England

It was also hoped the new Transparency Fund for Parishes might persuade parishes to be involved more. Parishes were being encouraged to run their own public websites. It was suggested we work with NALC in this connection.

### **(ii) Sounding Boards and a Rural Panel**

It was decided to expand the present system of two Sounding Boards (District and Parish Councillors) to a range attempting to capture:

- Young People (under 25) (suggested we work with Youth Clubs and Young Farmers Clubs here)
- Rural Businesses
- Rural Residents

Members asked for a Sounding Board of Rural Primary School Governors to also be considered.

It was hoped each Sounding Board could seek to comprise of at least 300 people (the number Gloucestershire University had suggested was representatively important).

Eventually, it was hoped that volunteers would come forward from those people in the 5 Sounding Boards who would be willing to constitute a cross representative spectrum of the rural population to be able to operate a Rural Panel.

## **8. Membership**

RSN Membership currently stood at 154 Local Authorities (132 Sparse Rural: 22 Rural Assembly only). RSP membership was around 80.

The Executive asked for a list of the Authorities who declined to be in membership. The question was posed how would such Authorities present co-ordinated evidential material that would be essential to arguing the rural case for the forthcoming needs assessments. It was felt the total rural picture required would be incomplete without these Authorities contributing to it.

The Executive asked that information be compiled showing both the global sum won by the work of the Group in relation to financial representation and how that sum was felt to break down Authority by Authority.

## **9. Devolution**

The position was discussed generally. There was concern that rural areas would again lose out in a situation that appeared to be dictated by urban mass.

## **10. A House of Lords Group**

With the undoubted success of the Commons Group, it was decided to seek to form a Lords Group. This might be achieved by initially more Lords being invited onto the APPG and an annual meeting of those Lords at least once a year. Members asked that the following people be approached:

Lord Cameron, Lord Taylor, Lord David Clark, Baroness Byford, Lord Rupert de Mauley, Lord Henley, Lord Henley, Lord Ullswater, Baroness Redfern (North Lincs), Lord Clark of Windermere.

## **11. Rural Unitary Group**

The Group planned to hold a seminar on Devolution led by the Leader of Cornwall County Council at Bath in the Spring. All RSN members would be invited.

## **12. Rural Fire and Rescue Group**

Fire and Rescue Group membership had now reached 15 Authorities. A meeting had been held in Northampton before Christmas. The Group had responded to the Provisional Settlement Consultation and the Chair had written to the Chancellor about the impact of the cuts.

It was decided that, in future, there would be one Annual Meeting involving Fire Chiefs and members and at least one meeting each year of Fire Finance Officers. The first of the latter form of meeting was planned for a date in March.

**13. RSN – ACRE – NALP Concordat**

Andy Dean presented a draft proposal by Officers and detailed what was hoped to be achieved. The document was agreed by the Executive.

**14. AOB**

It was decided that in future every Assembly meeting would have a presentation on a policy item from Brian Wilson. These often might mirror the policy item he had last done for rsnonline.

It was also agreed that at the end of each meeting consideration would be given to the topical item which the meeting wished to identify and pursue in letters to Government and other appropriate Agencies.

## **2015-16 Rural Services Network Seminar Programme**

### **Introduction**

The RSN currently supports 4 networking seminars per year. It has been running a seminar programme for almost 6 years, the first event was held in Cheltenham in October 2010. During that period approaching 1000 local authority officers, members and wider stakeholders have participated in the events.

The events have been held in accessible locations across England including: Newcastle, Hexham, Darlington, Ambleside, Penrith, Northallerton, York, Shrewsbury, Worcester, Cheltenham (on 3 occasions) , Macclesfield, Chester, Cirencester, Plymouth, Ipswich, Stevenage, Lincoln, Beverley, Exeter, Leicester, Market Harborough, Retford, Oxford and Bournemouth. The final seminar in the 2015-16 series will take place in London.

The purpose of the events is to provide RSN members with an opportunity to network, learn about good practice, share and develop new insights and challenges. Over the last two years the seminar programme, which reflects the key issues in the RSN manifesto, has culminated in the annual rural conference. This conference along with the seminar programme is developed and implemented by Rose Regeneration with the support of the RSN team in Tavistock.

Participation in the events is free, venues are usually sourced free of charge from member authorities and delegates buy their own lunch. On a number of occasions sponsorship has been secured to meet the cost of lunch.

### **2015-16 Programme**

The 2015-16 programme has involved 3 seminars to date:

Viable Rural Communities and Economies – Through the Lens of the Market Town: Market Harborough (19 August 2015): 37 attendees.

Tackling the Challenge of Ageing – Fuel Poverty and Services for the Elderly: Cirencester (18 November 2015): 27 attendees.

Making Rural Places Work – Planning and Affordable Housing: Northallerton (9 February 2016): 52 attendees.

The final seminar - Making the Rural Case – Finance and Access to Services/Rural Proofing is scheduled for London on 6 July.

Feedback from the first three seminars (not all participants complete a form) indicates:

- No participants found the seminars not useful
- 35 participants found the seminars useful
- 35 participants found the seminars very useful

### **2016–17 Programme**

Plans are currently in train for the 2016-17 programme. The key themes of the seminars will be based on the RSN manifesto. Possible themes under consideration include: Building Local Capacity – the challenge of enabling self-sustaining communities; LEPs and Locality – economic development in the new era; Health and Well-Being – maturing partnerships between local authorities and health bodies; rural devolution – the impact of devolution on rural communities.

More work is required to finalise the location of the programme but to achieve an even spread of opportunity for delegates to attend, the following locations, taking account of previous venues, are under consideration: Swindon, Durham, Colchester/Chelmsford and Burton on Trent.

## Devolution

### Summary of RSN policy messages

- Devolving powers, functions and budgets to the local level is welcome, in principle.
- The economic growth case for devolving to shire and rural areas is a powerful one.
- There is also a strong case based around public service reform in shire/rural areas.
- However, it must remain for local authorities to decide whether to pursue this.
- Some aspects of devolution would seem better as a staged process e.g. significant reform to further integrate health and social care.
- Government should be willing to countenance a wider range of devolution models.
- Whether in unitary or two tier areas, these should not necessarily require a directly elected mayor, which will not suit all local circumstances.
- Government should clarify the negotiating process and any unwritten rules, so that time and effort is not wasted with devolution bids.
- LEP boundaries and roles should be reviewed so they fit the emerging geography of devolution deals.

### Context

By common consent the UK (or at least England) is a relatively centralised state. Governments of various political hues have introduced measures aiming to devolve certain powers from the centre in Whitehall to regional, local and neighbourhood levels, though sometimes at the same time as imposing other central controls.

The current Government is pursuing a devolution agenda, through which it is negotiating deals to hand over certain functions and funding streams to combined authorities or local authorities. One notable element has been Whitehall's insistence that substantial devolution should require introducing a directly elected mayor.

### Rural issues

Among key rural issues are the following:

- Policy origins: the current devolution agenda has its roots in the 'City Deal' that was struck in 2014 with local authorities in Greater Manchester. This was followed soon after by a deal with Sheffield. Initially the policy push was specifically urban, with the emphasis on metropolitan areas and city-regions.



The Government position has since altered, though some say it has left a model more suited to urban conditions.

- Including rural: the approach raised concerns that shire areas and their rural communities would lose out. Framing the debate around city-regions raised two issues. First, a tendency to treat the most accessible rural areas as little more than residential commuter belts and, second, it excluded altogether consideration of the needs of less accessible rural areas.
- Economic growth: stimulating economic growth has been the main driver cited for the devolution policy agenda. Rural areas play a vital part within the national economy, with local authorities classified as 'mainly rural' or 'largely rural' contributing 16% of Gross Value Added (worth £210 billion in 2013). However, as our Rural Economy policy briefing note shows they also face various challenges, such as low wages and low productivity.
- Public service reform: another driver for devolution is public service reform, to help local authorities and public bodies work in partnership so they can improve services and generate efficiencies. This is highly relevant to rural areas, not least given the implications from their ageing populations for the future delivery of health and social care services.
- Geography and identity: the pattern across some rural areas may complicate the introduction of devolution, especially as currently formulated. Shire areas often don't revolve around an obvious population centre. Rather, they may have several distinct sub-areas whose residents hold different identities. This makes questionable the relevance of a single elected mayor.
- Local government structures: another complication is that most shire areas have two tiers of principal local authority (county and districts), as well as parish and town councils operating at the very local level. Some include National Park Authorities. Devolution deals can only proceed where the main tiers are in agreement and they should avoid duplication or adding complexity.
- Rural examples: despite these challenges quite a number of rural shire areas have demonstrated an interest in the devolution agenda. The most advanced is Cornwall, which announced a devolution deal in 2015. More recent announcements include: Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, in the North Midlands deal; Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire, in the East Anglia deal; plus Lincolnshire and North Lincolnshire, in the Greater Lincolnshire deal.

## **Government policies**

The last Coalition Government announced its devolution intentions for (initially) English cities in 2014, at the same time as launching devolution proposals for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This built upon ideas in ‘the Heseltine report’.

The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act passed into law in January 2016. It is enabling legislation which allows agreements reached on devolution deals to be implemented. Proposals can be put forward for negotiation with Whitehall by local authorities or (more often) groups of local authorities.

Where agreed, certain functions currently undertaken by Whitehall departments or public bodies will in future be carried out at the local or sub-regional level. Budgets for these functions will also be devolved. In practice nearly all deals agreed to-date cover business support services, adult skills funding, employment support, bus franchising, transport budgets and strategic planning. Some deals include policing, fire services, health and social care, children’s services and waste management.

Perhaps the most contentious element has been the Government’s insistence that substantial devolution should require the introduction of a directly elected mayor. Where relevant this will replace the Police and Crime Commissioner.

Early agreements on devolution deals predate the Act. The first was struck in late 2014 with Greater Manchester metropolitan boroughs (who will form the Greater Manchester Combined Authority). Deals with Sheffield and West Yorkshire followed soon after.

More recent Government statements have been clear that devolution opportunities can apply to shire as well as metropolitan areas and many have been working up proposals. The first shire deal was that agreed in July 2015 with Cornwall Council and the county’s NHS Trust. It is an unusual example in that there will be no combined authority and (given the existing unitary status of the county council) it does not require a directly elected mayor. The deals for North Midlands, East Anglia and Greater Lincolnshire all cover areas with two principal tiers of local government and all involve a directly elected mayor.

	Cornwall	North Midlands	East Anglia	Greater Lincs
<i>Education and skills:</i>				
Post-16 further education	Yes		Yes	Yes
Apprenticeship grants		Yes	Yes	Yes
Adult skills funding		Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Transport:</i>				
Devolved transport budget	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bus franchising	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Role in highways and rail networks				Yes
Local roads network		Yes	Yes	

Smart ticketing	Yes	Yes	Yes	
<i>Business support:</i>				
Devolved business support	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Joint work with UK Trade & Investment		Yes		Yes
<i>Employment support:</i>				
Some Jobseeker Allowance support		Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Land and housing:</i>				
Public land or joint assets board	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Housing loan or grant fund		Yes	Yes	
Compulsory purchase orders				
Mayoral development corporations		Yes	Yes	Yes
Planning call-in powers				Yes
Spatial land use strategy		Yes	Yes	
<i>Public services:</i>				
Integration of health and social care	Yes			
Offender management				Possibly
Police and crime commissioner role		Yes	Possibly	Possibly
Manage fire and rescue service				Possibly
<i>Energy:</i>				
Energy efficiency and energy projects	Yes			
<i>Finance:</i>				
Intermediate Body EU Structural Funds	Yes	Yes		
Retains 100% business rates growth			Yes	
Can set business rate supplement		Yes	Yes	Yes
Retain part of CIL			Possibly	

## RSN policy messages

The Rural Services Network considers that:

1. In principle, the devolution of powers, functions and budgets to the local level is greatly to be welcomed. It is hoped that all relevant Whitehall departments engage positively and coherently so the policy can live up to its potential.
2. Government should recognise that rural areas represent a significant part of the national economy and its potential for growth. The economic case for agreeing devolution deals is just as strong for shire and rural areas as it is for metropolitan areas and city-regions.
3. Similarly, Government should recognise that the drive for public service reform, which devolution deals can support, is just as keenly felt in rural and shire areas as it is in metropolitan areas and city-regions. Further integration of health and social care services for older people is a case in point.
4. Equally important, however, is that local authorities are not cajoled or forced into devolution deals and that they can proceed with this agenda at their own

pace. Government must maintain its line that this is a voluntary policy. Those areas which chose to opt out should not lose out financially.

5. The priority Government affords the growth agenda should not result in devolution deals which rush things that need a longer timeframe. For example, implementing major reform to further integrate health and social care services is likely to take years and may work better if it is a staged process.
6. Government should be more open about the types of structures or devolution models that best suit local circumstances. As well as combined authorities and existing single unitaries, this could include things such as federations or public service boards.
7. Government should accept that a directly elected mayor will not be appropriate in some shire areas. This could be true both in areas with a unitary council *and* in areas with a two tier principal local government structure.
8. At the same time, Government should clarify the negotiating process and any unwritten rules, so that time and effort is not wasted. Frustration is caused when bids are challenged for reasons such as the size of the geographic area or whether the powers sought should warrant an elected mayor.
9. Government should set in-hand a review of Local Enterprise Partnership boundaries and roles, with a view to rationalising them so that they fit around the emerging geography of devolution deals.

*RSN policy briefing notes are written primarily for use by Network members and partners. They are updated from time to time in order to take account of policy developments. RSN welcomes suggestions for updating this material.*



Version: March 2016