

## **Note of decisions taken and actions required**

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**Title:** Rural Services Network SIG Rural Assembly AGM

**Date and time:** 1.00pm, 17 November 2014

**Venue:** Westminster Suite, Local Government House

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### **Attendance:**

Cllr Cecilia Motley (Shropshire Council); Cllr Cameron Clark (Sevenoaks DC); Cllr Hilary Carrick (Cumbria CC); Cllr Myles Cullen (Chichester DC); Cllr Gordon Nicolson (Eden DC); Cllr Owen Bierley (West Lindsey DC); Cllr Lewis Strange (Lincolnshire CC); Revd Richard Kirlew (Church in Wales); Cllr Malcolm Leeding (Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils); Cllr Peter Stevens (St Edmundsbury BC); Cllr Lindsey Cawrey (North Kesteven); Cllr Madge Shingleton (Shropshire Council); Cllr Robert Heseltine (North Yorkshire CC); Cllr Rupert Riechhold (ENC); Cllr Roger Begy (Rutland CC); Cllr David Ireton (Craven DC) - standing in for Cllr Richard Foster; Cllr Les Kew (Bath and NE Somerset); Cllr Robert Whiting (Suffolk CC); Cllr Jeremy Savage (South Norfolk DC); Cllr John Savage (Wycombe DC); Cllr Jane March (Tunbridge Wells BC); Cllr Mrs Jane March (Tunbridge Wells BC); Cllr Ken Pollock (Worcestershire CC) Cllr Neil Butters (Bath and NE Somerset); Keri Lawrence (Tendring DC); Elizabeth Ridout (Tendring DC); Suzanne Clear (National Union of Farmers); Councillor John Clarke (Gedling); David Wakelin (Gedling); Cllr Rosemary Doyle (Canterbury)

Officers: David Inman (RSN); Graham Biggs (RSN); Dan Bates (RSN) Kerry Booth (RSN) Brian Wilson (RSN) and Andy Dean (RSN)

### **Apologies for absence:**

Adam Norburn (Rugby Borough Council); Cllr Rupert Riechhold (ENC); John Birtwistle (UK Bus); Patrick Begg (National Trust); Cllr Eddie Tomlinson (Durham Council); William Jacobs (South Oxfordshire DC & Vale of White Horse); Cllr Jane Evison (East Riding of Yorkshire Council); Cllr Philip Sanders (West Devon BC); Cllr Chris Knowles-Fitton (Craven DC); Ian Miller (Wyre Forest DC); Alison Turner (Sedgemoor DC); Cllr Barry Rickman (New Forest District Council); Cllr Ken Potter (East Devon District Council); Richard Kemp (Suffolk Council); Cllr Jeremy Savage (South Norfolk District Council); Cllr Yvonne Bendle (South Norfolk District Council); Cllr Raymond Singleton-McGuire (Boston Borough Council); Cllr Mary Robinson (Eden District Council); Cllr Nigel Ashton (North Somerset Council).

## **Decisions and actions**

### **1. Apologies for absence**

Cllr Motley welcomed all to the Rural Services Network SIG Rural Assembly meeting.

*Apologies were noted and would appear in the minutes.*

## **2. Minutes of the last full meeting – 14<sup>th</sup> July 2014**

*The minutes the last full meeting were agreed.*

## **3. Minutes of the last Executive Meeting – 15<sup>th</sup> September 2014**

Graham Biggs announced that the Rural Conference in September had received good feedback and made a small profit. The network would be looking to repeat it next year.

He said that the Executive had recommended that meetings concluded earlier to ensure members were given sufficient time to get trains going back.

He reported that the planned meeting between Rural Fair Shares Group MPs and Eric Pickles MP would now take place with Kris Hopkins MP as the recently appointed Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

The minutes of the last Executive Meeting were agreed.

## **4. Membership (Constitutional Requirement)**

David Inman announced that the total representatives on RSN from local authorities was now up to 148 and he would like to increase this still further over the coming year.

## **5. Constitution**

Graham Biggs highlighted paragraph 8.3 of the constitution that the provisions relating to position of the Chairman of the RSN and the Rural Assembly Sub Group be applicable from the 2014 AGM. He suggested that the date was changed to 2015 to ensure structural consistency in the run-up to the general election and this was agreed by members.

On paragraph 8.6, members highlighted that a word was missing.

On paragraph 1.2, members suggested that the phrase “shall be eligible” be changed to “shall be open” to emphasise the group’s inclusivity.

Graham thanked members and said that these comments would be picked up in the redrafted constitution to be sent out.

David pointed out the requirements in current and proposed new constitution regarding the giving of notice by authorities who might wish to leave. The group could not operate viably without these clauses which were common to many LGA groups.

## **6. Budget Report 2014/15 and 2015/16**

On the Budget, Graham said the bottom line in both years was that it was envisaged a surplus would be carried forward. However, this was dependent on receiving those subscriptions which had not yet been paid. He commended the report to members, but said he would provide an update to the Executive once there was certainty regarding this year's subscriptions.

The Budget was agreed with authority given to the Executive to amend both the revised 2014/15 and budget 2015/16 as necessary.

## **7. RSN Services and Schedule of Meetings for 2015 (Constitutional Requirement)**

Graham said that there had been no increase in the RSN's service charge in 5 successive years. It was therefore proposed to increase this for SPARSE-Rural members by £50 so as to fund an ongoing small fighting fund for key financial causes. He asked members to let their treasuries know.

The schedule of meetings for the forthcoming year were formally agreed. A proposal to move the time from 11.30am to 11.15am to give members from more remote areas more time to get return trains was **agreed**.

On the day of the week meetings were held, while it was agreed that Monday was not always ideal for all members, it was seen to be a more convenient day than mid-week. Members recognised that no single day of the week would be convenient for all.

### **Action**

Future meetings to be timetabled for 11.15am.

## **8. Rural Manifesto**

Graham Biggs introduced this item. He asked members to consider and approve the final draft of the manifesto, following the membership survey, information gathering and consultation exercises.

Cllr Motley asked members to feed in their comments section by section.

On **the planning system**, members commented that page 10 should include something on replacing housing stock through right to buy via the call for action.

On page 9, it was suggested that the point on exempting small sites with fewer than 10 homes be emphasised more strongly. Graham agreed to amend this, but said that this point had already been strongly emphasised to the minister on this issue.

On the bedroom tax, some members commented on its inflexibility. They argued for an easing of some of the terms, including the need for rooms big enough to allow twin beds where these were required for health reasons.

On **public transport**, members asked if more could be done to ease the tax burden on volunteers giving lifts to older residents.

Some members raised the issue of consistency of transport services where providers were operating across multiple authorities. It was highlighted that there were means for authorities to ensure this under existing legislation, including the ability to specify minimum standards of service and a select list of contractors.

On **Health and Older people**, Members discussed the difficulty of recruiting GPs and medical staff into rural areas.

In order to be able to plan for the longer term, Members advocated seeking a clear commitment from Government that the Better Care Fund would be in place for three to five years as oppose to the current year.

On **fuel poverty**, David Inman drew members' attention to [research](#) into fuel poverty in rural and off gas households conducted by Calor and National Energy Action.

Members suggested that key items of the manifesto be put to the People and Places lead members.

## **Decision**

Members **approved** the manifesto subject to it taking into account the comments and points raised in the meeting.

## Action

Officers to incorporate members' comments in re-draft of the Rural Manifesto .  
**Graham Biggs**

Manifesto to be shared with People and Places colleagues. **Graham Biggs / Stephen Service**

## **9. Rural Sounding Board**

Kerry Booth presented this item.

Graham Biggs proposed that a Sounding Board exercise be conducted at the run up to each of the three main RSN meetings and thus become a regular feature of each meeting. This was agreed by members.

On the Sounding Board mailing list, Kerry said that the intention was to now make the list "opt out" rather than "opt in" for those authorities who have not yet signed up. This was also agreed by the meeting.

## Action

Sounding Board exercise be conducted at the start of each of the three main RSN meetings. **David Inman / Kerry Booth**

Presentation to be circulated to members following meeting. **Stephen Service**

## 10. Presentation - Rural Transport Briefing (Defra)

Andrew McWhir, from the Rural Communities Policy Unit at Defra updated members on Defra's current work on rural transport. This included Defra's working group on rural transport for young people and the rural transport reference group. Recently funded projects have included "Wheels to work", a scheme that offers transport solutions to get **people** to work, training, or college where public transport isn't available and a new initiative to help rural communities with the provision of mini buses. The groups are also looking at joint commissioning to deliver on rural transport by sharing good practice and considering existing models.

The following issues were raised in the member discussion that followed:

Members asked how RSN could work closer together with Defra. Andrew said that it was about keeping the dialogue open and committing to new ways of working together.

The high levels of risk assessment required for every person carried by a volunteer driver was considered overly bureaucratic by some members. Andrew responded that while burdens were there for a reason, Defra need to have a hard look to ensure that the burdens currently placed on drivers are appropriate.

On health delivery, members felt the NHS could do more to break with its silo mentality and work with partners. Andrew agreed, saying that there were huge opportunities for efficiency savings.

Cllr Motley thanked Andrew for attending and urged Defra to make use of the RSN's large membership to disseminate key messages.

## 11. Update on the APPG on Rural services

Cllr Motley welcomed Graham Stuart MP, Chair of the APPG on Rural Services to report on the latest work of this group.

Graham identified a number of key issues currently being investigated by the group, including how the phasing out the minimum income practice guarantee would affect GPs in rural areas, community payback schemes for areas affected by fracking, and the disproportionate impact of cuts on rural services.

Members asked about the current membership of the group. Graham said that there were currently fewer members than he would like but that it was continuing to press for change. He urged members to lobby their local MP and ask them to attend. Graham also said that groups of constituents could be a

David Inman commented that the APPG would need to be reconstituted in the new parliament, so lobbying local MPs at this point would be particularly timely.

On devolution to cities, Graham said that rural areas need to get involved in the issue as otherwise the vacuum would be filled by those who might not have the best interests of rural communities at heart.

Members raised the issue of land-grabbing by authorities like Hull and asked if local authorities would be able to use their council tax to build on greenbelt land. Graham responded that in Hull's case a referendum was carried out independently of the council which showed 96 percent were against it. This had succeeded in preventing the proposal from being implemented. He advocated this early intervention approach in other areas where similar moves were being considered.

Members asked about Solar farms in areas of outstanding natural beauty. Graham stressed that this should be a local decision and presented a challenge in balancing potentially conflicting sets of interests.

Graham Biggs said that the RSN would send Graham Stuart the Rural Manifesto once finalised to increase awareness of its "asks" among MPs.

## **Action**

Officers to send Graham the Rural Manifesto once finalised.

**Graham Biggs / Stephen Service**

## **12. Community Issue**

Richard Kirlaw of the Church of Wales gave a presentation on the role of local rural advisers and rural officers in farming communities.

## **13. UK Policy and Practitioners report**

Brian Wilson said that there was not much more to report on the group at this stage. It was therefore agreed that the update be postponed until the next meeting which was due in December.

## **14. Website update**

Johann Tasker updated members, which included news that the website had received a 19 percent increase in web traffic and that RSN was looking to work more closely with regional partnerships, including Calor.

## **15. Report on the RSP Service Groups**

David Inman asked if members had any comments on the Service Group themes.

**Association**

Members asked about the absence of planning as a theme. David said that the services included tended to be those where a definite output could be stipulated, whereas planning was seen as part of local authorities' regulatory service. However, he agreed to ask Trevor Cherret how the group might look at planning as a service group issue and whether it might be possible to have a representative from the Rural Town Planning Institute involved.

Members asked how high a priority rural crime was on the agenda in light of diminished resources. Graham Biggs said that a rural crime network had just been established, with each member giving £2K for the next 2 years. The intention is to pass any issues emerging from RSN onto this group.

**Action**

Officers to investigate with Trevor Cherret how planning might be more systematically incorporated as part of service group work and whether it might be possible to have a representative from the Rural Town Planning Institute involved. **David Inman**

**16. Community Group**

No representations from Community Groups were received.

**Other business**

No other business was raised.

Cllr Motley thanked all for attending and closed the meeting.

NEXT MEETING 13<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2014