

Note of last SPARSE Rural Special Interest Group meeting

Title: SPARSE Rural Services Network Special Interest Group

Date: Monday 24 June 2019

Venue: Westminster Room, 8th Floor, 18 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ

Attendance

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

Item	Decisions and actions
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1. Apologies for absence (see Appendix B)

Cllr Cecilia Motley welcomed members to the meeting and outlined the agenda which included background information on planned talks for the afternoon session.

2. Minutes of meeting held 28 January

The minutes from the previous meeting were approved.

3. Minutes of Executive Meeting 20 May 2019

The minutes from the last meeting of the Executive were noted. Specific issues arising from that meeting included a change of date for the AGM, now taking place at the beginning of December in order to avoid clashing with the CCN Conference.

Members were asked to note that the first of the proposed Rural Strategy Regional Roadshows would be 11 July in Newcastle. RSN are currently awaiting confirmation of financial support.

The first meeting of the APPG relating to the Lords Select Committee was provisionally set for 2 July.

The Leading Edge Initiative – a conference call has been arranged with Cornwall and Shropshire Councils to ensure avoidance of any duplication or overlap in the work undertaken.

Mr Inman outlined ongoing work around setting up the groups previously discussed – including the proposed Rural/Market Towns Group.

4. Local Government Finance

The Chairman moved onto the issue of local government finance and in particular the proposed new Needs Formula and 75% business rates retention.

Mr Biggs reminded the group that there had been a MHCLG proposal to publish a consultation document with exemplifications of what the new formula would mean for

individual local authorities. He stated that is now unlikely to happen. There is probably not going to be any conclusion to the fair funding review until a comprehensive spending review is completed – which is unlikely to happen this year. This is because of the current political position and other governmental priorities at this point.

Members heard that, at the moment there is insufficient clarity about the formula and all current thinking is that there will be no comprehensive spending review this Autumn although there will probably be a one year budget with a roll-over of the existing local government formula with additional funding for Social Care.

Mr Biggs referred to discussions held with Pixel regarding preparation of a briefing note around this issue to remind MPs and one for newly elected councillors to inform and notify of current needs for increase of funding for the rural service delivery grant as well as social care funding. Both of these important issues need to be sustained and a commitment from the government must be sought to lock in the positive implementation of the existing principles in the proposed Needs formula.

Members noted positives arising from the consultation and the danger in these being undermined if there is delay.

Members points included:

- Concerns that if an announcement about changes is delayed, management of financial implications must be prepared in advance.
- Of all of the positives for rural, it is difficult to see the total quantum for distribution without the spending review;
- Ministers may be tempted to strip money out of the more solvent authorities to assist those less so;
- They suggested that targeted ministers be approached to engage on these issues;
- Members referred to Brexit and the feeling that Ministers are reluctant to make any funding decision until the outcome is clear;
- There were concerns about the imbalance in council tax levies between urban and rural authorities and the fact that needs and therefore costs, are much higher in rural;
- Are there any County Councils likely to go under? – the Chairman stated that the CCN would have this information, but it is unlikely that they would want this publicised;
- Budgets need to be balanced, and because of this, councils will have to decide where to move money around to deal with their statutory duties and other priorities;
- There is a worry that many councils have borrowed to invest in commercial property and these investments are vulnerable given the current climate and exchange rates;
- There is a real challenge to overcome and this needs to be recognised by government and constituencies;
- If quality of services have to go down, this will impact on the popularity of MPs and it might be a good idea to produce data on this and in particular, how many of these services are going into special measures. Someone needs to take responsibility and the profile of these issues needs to be raised;
- Negotiations should be concentrated on engaging with HMCLG on the funding formulae.
- It is important to develop places as a critical issue rather than discretionary issue as is currently suggested. Government must realise that anything to do with 'Place' should not be put under discretionary as this is key to affecting people.

The Chairman referred to problems with solvency of certain authorities and questioned whether this had been considered. It was felt that MHCLG and Treasury and Ministry for Health & Social Care acknowledge that this is due to costs of Social Care.

Mr Biggs informed members of previous discussions and that it appears that the Green Paper will not refer to distribution of government funding but about personal contributions to care. Members noted that it is unlikely that sign-off will take place any time soon and they felt the actual substance of the Green Paper may be very disappointing. In addition, it is also clear that consequences on insufficient funding in social care has a much greater implication for rural areas.

A member referred to local delivery of essential services and asked Mr Biggs to outline the Lords report.

5. Lords Report on Rural Economy Chapter

Mr Biggs asked whether there is anything within the report that members disagree with at this point. He referred to a document which has been prepared which shows evidence that up to 80% of what was included in the RSN Template has been included in the Lords Report.

Action: The document will be circulated to members and includes some issues raised by the Lords which the RSN had not raised.

One member was concerned that the suggestion that areas need to urbanise in order to receive the benefits that they expect – this is not what rural inhabitants want.

The group discussed key issues within the report and focussed on particular areas in turn.

Their comments included:

Transport

- Transport issues – the suggestion to put this into a single investment pot needed to be considered very carefully, and more detailed proposals put forward to look at the real need for certain services and whether rural transport is actually being used properly.
- There are concerns that some rural transport is a waste of money as they are insufficiently utilised, and members agreed that a review of better use and a place-based approach should be carried out by government;
- Worries that the total amount will end up less and there would be reluctance to take responsibility for a single pot;
- Is the planning system engaging in rural self-help schemes to enable residents to support themselves;
- The biggest cost of transport is the driver and consideration of a community led transport alternative should be uppermost in looking at this issue;
- Public transport prevents people from becoming socially isolated and is not just a luxury;
- Perhaps setting up a centre might be cheaper where a transport system could be used to arrange necessary transport rather than a bus service;

- They discussed app-based products currently used by certain villages – run by bus companies as an option to consider;
- Rural proofing doesn't seem to be happening;
- Reference to schemes being run in rural villages to use alternatives to standard transport services. It was felt that there is quite a lot of scope for savings, but it really needs more work and a greater coherent steer. A lot of it will be dependent on local connectivity.

The group agreed that the work suggested with the DfT be taken forward and then to consider the consequences.

Crime

Mr Biggs moved onto crime issues and the group held a brief discussion on the recommendations.

Members agreed the following:

- Higher penalties for fly tipping and difficulties around actual disposal of waste – it was noted that these decisions and whether to charge for disposal is with the local authority;
- There are specific issues around social crime in rural areas and this needs to be defined at the local level;
- There is a cynicism about whether anything will be done about certain crimes.

The group agreed in principle with the recommendations at this point in time.

Health

Members agreed the recommendations at this level. The next stage is for the government to prepare its response to the Lords Select Committee Report. Only once it is published will the RSN be able to decide the way forward.

There were concerns raised, however, that certain community hospitals will be closed and the move to digital health will not be suitable to meet the needs of an ageing rural population. There are fears and a real lack of reassurance for the vulnerable and this will also impact on social integration and isolation. Members feared that these health hubs may still not be fit for purpose. It was felt that the model is more relevant to urban areas and there has been no thought given to the practical issues faced by rural communities such as travel times, accessibility etc.

The placement of Local Rural strategies will always be helpful in taking things forward.

Budget Report

Members noted the report for information.

6. Any other Business

There was no other business. Members were reminded to sign the attendance sheet as evidence of their presence at the meeting.

Attendees

Organisation	Name
Cllr Cecilia Motley, Chair	RSN
Graham Biggs, Chief Executive	RSN
David Inman, Director	RSN
Cllr Virginia Taylor	Eden District Council
Cllr Mary Robinson	Eden District Council
Cllr Mark Whittington	Lincolnshire County Council
Cllr Trevor Thorne	Northumberland County Council
Cllr Edward Baines	Rutland County Council
Cllr Sue Tucker	Scarborough Borough Council
Ian Knowles, Executive Director of Resources & Head of Paid Services	West Lindsey District Council
Cllr Margaret Squires	Mid Devon District Council
Cllr Jeremy Savage	South Norfolk Council
Cllr Rupert Reichhold	East Northamptonshire District Council
Cllr Robert Heseltine	North Yorkshire County Council
Cllr Owen Bierley	West Lindsey District Council
Cllr Yvonne Peacock	Richmondshire District Council
Cllr Louise Richardson	Leicestershire County Council
Peter Stevens	West Suffolk Council
Anna Price	Rural Business Group
Cllr Lindsey Cawson	North Kesteven District Council
Ken Pollock	Worcestershire Council
Cllr Gwenlyn Butler	Shropshire Council
Fatima de Abreu	Local Government Association

Apologies

Organisation	Name
Cllr Richard Sherras	Ribble Valley Borough Council
Terry Collins, Chief Executive	Durham County Council
Cllr Sue Sanderson	Cumbria County Council
Cllr Peter Thornton	Cumbria County Council
Gary Powell, Community Projects Officer	Teignbridge District Council
Cllr John Ward	Babergh District Council
Anna Graves, Chief Executive	Breckland and South Holland District Council
Revd Richard Kirlew	Sherborne Deanery Rural Chaplaincy
Cllr Richard Sherras	Ribble Valley Borough Council
Cllr Lois Samuel	West Devon Borough Council
Peter Catchpole, Corporate Director	Fenland District Council
Cllr Rob Waltham	North Lincolnshire Council
Cllr Adam Paynter	Cornwall Council
Cllr John Blackie	North Yorkshire County Council
Cllr Ben Ingham	East Devon District Council
Cllr Alan Whittaker	Chorley Council
Cllr Stephen Burroughes	East Suffolk Council
Cllr Daniel Cribbin	Daventry District Council
Cllr Sue Sanderson	Cumbria County Council
Cllr Gary Taylor	South Holland District Council
Cllr Jonathan Brook	South Lakeland District Council