



The Rural Services Network

National Rural Conference 2024

Delivering for Rural – Unlocking rural prosperity

Wednesday 18th September

Community Services Discussion Session



AI GENERATED SUMMARY OF THE SESSION

National Rural Conference Overview and Network Role

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, welcomed participants to the Rural Connectivity session of the National Rural Conference and thanking the conference's supporters and sponsors, and briefly discussed the Rural Services Network's role as the National Champion for rural services. Kerry emphasized the RSN's role in advocating for fairer funding for rural public services and rural policy that caters to the needs of rural communities. She highlighted the importance of community businesses, the challenges of services moving out of rural areas, and the funding disparities between urban and rural councils.

Investing in Community Infrastructure and Governance

Jonathan Owen, Chief Executive of NALC (National Association of Local Councils) emphasized the importance of investing in community infrastructure to support local communities and deliver national growth. He highlighted the role of local councils in delivering services, raising funds, and contributing to community wellbeing. Jonathan also stressed the need for more people from diverse backgrounds to get involved in local governance and encouraged collaboration between different tiers of government. He concluded by urging the new government to recognize the potential of local councils in delivering their missions. The discussion also touched on the challenges faced by smaller parishes in recruiting councillors and the need for direct engagement between different tiers of government.

Rural Policy Team Statistical Digest Discussion

Stephen Hall, Rural Statistics Team Leader from DEFRA joined by Rural Statisticians Beth Kerwin and Sarah Harriss discussed the statistical digest publication they produce on a regular basis. They covered various topics such as population, housing, health and wellbeing, communities and household, connectivity, accessibility, broadband and mobile travel behaviours, access to transport, access to services, and homeworking. They also discussed the rural urban classification, which is applied to a wide range of geographies, and the challenges with the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) in rural areas. Sarah then presented examples of the statistics they produce, including accessibility statistics, deprivation, and local authority data. They also mentioned their work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government on reviewing and updating the indices of deprivation.

Rural Data Availability and Upcoming Classification Update

Stephen and his colleagues from DEFRA discussed the availability of data for rural areas and the limitations of some of the data used. They emphasized that the data they provide is already available in the public domain and encouraged stakeholders to contact them for further information. They also mentioned an upcoming update to the rural-urban classification, which could help promote rural analysis in policy-making. The team also addressed a question from Professor Mark Shucksmith about multivariate analysis and the use of more detailed classifications in their data.

Rural Funding Digest and Local Growth Funds Discussion

Nadine Trout, Assistant Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network gave an overview of the RSN's services, including the funding digest, which provides communities with resources to inform, fund, and shape services in rural areas. The Rural Funding Digest, a monthly publication tailored for a national rural audience, features funds from various sources, including leading charities, trusts, and government funds. Cllr Mandy Ewings from West Devon expressed her appreciation for the digest, noting its usefulness in securing funding for various projects. Nadine also highlighted the importance of local growth funds to rural communities and referred to a presentation made at the Conference earlier in the week which touched on future MCHLG funding. Nadine advised that the RSN produces economic and social area profiles for each parish in its membership, drawing on census data, and offers resources such as hot topics, and member insights and analysis to aid with the formation of funding bids. She stated the RSN also participates in government consultations and provides feedback to government departments.

Rural Services Network and Policy Agenda Discussion

Graham Biggs, Policy Advisor at the RSN and Jonathan from NALC discussed the upcoming policy agenda, highlighting the need for the Rural Services Network to identify and flag impacts for rural areas. They emphasized the importance of engaging with the new Labour MPs and encouraging their memberships to communicate their views. Jonathan also mentioned the need to work together to ensure national grants are accessible to the most rural communities.

Improving Rural Statistics Digest Awareness and Policy

Carole expressed interest in the Rural Statistics Digest and its potential to shape policy. She questioned how the digest is used to influence policy and how awareness of it can be improved. Stephen from DEFRA explained that while awareness is not perfect, they engage with policy teams in other departments and provide briefing to their ministers. They also participate in the Regional and Geography Committee and the Rural Insight Forum. Stephen agreed that directing people to the digest could be beneficial for those advocating on behalf of communities. Cllr Julian German from Cornwall asked for guidance on accessing mapping data on the Defra website, which was confirmed to be embedded within individual reports.

Rural Impact of Policies and Rural Proofing Discussion

The meeting involved a discussion about the rural impact of policies and the need for rural proofing. The meeting also discussed changes to rural classifications, with Stephen from DEFRA explaining that some authorities may change due to demographic changes or methodological changes.

Rural Communities, Devolution, and Centralization Challenges

The discussion revolved around the challenges of rural communities in the face of devolution and centralization of authority. Jonathan from NALC emphasized the need for a strong voice for rural communities and suggested working together with other interested parties and parliamentarians to make this case. He also highlighted the importance of local and county-level collaboration to articulate the needs of rural areas. The panel also discussed the need to ensure that rural areas are not overlooked in strategies and funding, as they often face hidden deprivation.

Next Steps

1. Defra team to publish updated 2021 census-based rural-urban classifications later this year.

- 2.** RSN and rural organizations to engage with new MPs on rural issues and invite them to see local challenges.
- 3.** RSN and partners to advocate for rural considerations in devolution and combined authority discussions.