

## **RSN Seminar: Rural Economy – AI Summary meeting notes**

29<sup>th</sup> April 2026

### **Rural Economy Seminar Opening Address**

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, opened the Rural Economy Seminar by introducing the organisation's Delivering for All campaign and key policy foundations. She presented findings from their "Rural Realities" research, highlighting that rural residents feel forgotten in national policy development and facing challenges with the economy, infrastructure, and workforce recruitment.

### **Northeast Coastal and Rural Task Force**

Professor Jeremy Philipson, Director, and Melanie Thompson-Glenn, Head of Business and Innovation at the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE), discussed the work of the Northeast Combined Authority's Coastal and Rural Task Force, which brings together national and regional partners to develop policy solutions for coastal and rural communities. They highlighted the importance of integrating rural economies into the work of combined authorities, noting that over 20% of the North East's population lives in rural areas. The discussion covered recent devolution progress in the North East, including three devolution deals and the establishment of an Environmental Stewardship Coast and Rural Growth Investment Plan. The speakers emphasised the need for a dedicated focus on rural affairs and the importance of building an evidence base to highlight opportunities and challenges in rural economies.

The Environmental Stewardship Coast and Rural Growth Investment Plan was approved in November 2024 with an initial allocation of £17.5 million, and Melanie explained how the rural portfolio is now split between two missions following local elections in May 2025. The presentation detailed the Coast and Rural Task Force, which brings together partners to shape future policy and test new approaches, with three priority areas: agriculture and land use, climate adaptation and resilience, and coastal and rural communities. The task force meets quarterly and is currently launching solution sessions across the region, with a microsite providing updates on their work.

### **Rural Funding Landscape Changes**

Katie Dalsgaard from Cornwall Council presented on the future funding landscape for economic growth and its impact on rural areas. She highlighted Cornwall's economic ambitions outlined in their Good Growth Plan, which focuses on distinctive sectors like critical minerals, renewable energy, and space, as well as core sectors such as visitor economy, agri-food, and creative and cultural industries. Katie expressed concern about the shift in national funding toward urban areas, noting that Cornwall's funding will significantly decrease following the end of the Shared Prosperity Fund, leaving a gap between demand and available resources. She also criticised the Pride in Place funding program for having an unintended urban bias due to its methodology and metrics, emphasising the need for balanced support of rural economies for national growth and resilience.

Katie presented on deprivation across both urban and rural areas, highlighting that while rural communities may be perceived as affluent, they face their own challenges and require innovative funding approaches.

### **Local Making a difference**

Lisa Courtney from Saffron Walden Town Council shared how their council supports the local economy through events, market operations, the Tourist Information Centre, and community partnerships, including their recent establishment of the Jubilee Hub. Delegates were able to see how action at a local level, can support the growth and sustainability of the local economy.

### **Rural Development and Devolution Strategy**

The meeting discussed rural development and devolution, with participants exploring how to build on government recognition of rural areas' unique needs. The group examined the Devolution bill and its implications for rural economic policy, with Jeremy suggesting the focus should be on developing guidance and metrics to ensure rural considerations are properly integrated into strategic authorities' work. The discussion also covered how rural local authorities can maintain collaboration as governance structures change, and Kerry raised concerns about funding allocation using outdated deprivation data. Kerry emphasised that whatever the structure, or shape of local authorities, the RSN would remain as the voice of rural service delivery, building on its 30 years of experience in rural policy and funding.

Lisa shared Saffron Walden Town Council's experience in developing ambition and maintaining political direction, explaining how the Council was controlled by a local Residents Group who have driven change at both the town and district council levels.

### **Rural Planning Strategy Discussion**

The meeting focused on strategic approaches for involving rural areas in local authority planning processes. Melanie emphasised the importance of having a clear shared vision and inclusive stakeholder engagement, supported by a strong evidence base. Lisa highlighted the benefits of sharing data and information across organisations to enhance partnership working. Katie discussed the need for a comprehensive approach to rural economy development, emphasising that multiple infrastructure improvements are required rather than focusing on a single element. The conversation ended with announcements about upcoming events, including a Social Value Engine session exclusively for RSN members and the launch of bookings for the National Rural Conference which takes place in September.