

Report from Sparse-Rural Special Interest Group

Purpose of report

For discussion

Summary

Cllr Roger Begy, Chair of Sparse-Rural SIG, will give a presentation at the meeting about the work of the SIG.

The Executive will be invited to ask questions following the presentation.

Recommendations

The Executive are invited to consider the report from Sparse-Rural Special Interest Group

Action

As directed by Members.

Contact officer: Graham Biggs
Position: Chief Executive, Sparse-Rural SIG
e-mail: graham.biggs@sparse.gov.uk

Report from Sparse-Rural Special Interest Group

History and Introduction

1. SPARSE-Rural was formed in the early 1990's originally as a District Council Group under the ADC prior to the formation of the LGA. It was the only SIG specifically referred to in the "Prospectus" for the formation of the LGA.
 - 1.1 On the formation of the LGA its membership criteria was extended to cover English Counties, Districts and Unitary Councils.
 - 1.2 It now comprises just short of 100 Local Authorities.
2. The nature of the membership's 'common interest' is all matters relating to living, working and providing services to communities living in Predominantly Rural England the most rural of the government's rural classifications. It is the impacts of policy, economic trends, governance etc in these geographical areas which are our concern, rather than the impact in rural areas generally.
3. The Local Government Funding Formulae and their lack of recognition of the costs associated with settlement patterns and population dispersal was the Group's main area of work until the late 1990's when issues relating to service delivery in our members areas became of equal focus. We have representation on the Government's Settlement Working Group and have achieved some real success in the past through our detailed research (and lobbying).
4. In the early 2000's the Group (together with the then Commission for Rural Communities) sponsored the creation of a 'sister' organisation – The Rural Services Partnership (RSP) (now a not for dividend company Limited by Guarantee). The RSP has some 120 subscribing members in England from across the non local authority public services, and also from rural interest groups from the private and voluntary sectors.
5. The RSP also has a Community Group with extensive membership from Parish/Town Councils, Primary Schools local Chambers of Commerce etc. Membership is free to Parishes, Schools and Organisations in SPARSE-Rural member authority areas but there is a small charge where this is not the case. This group is extensive and has nearly 9,000 contacts.

Item 2

6. We seek private sector strategic partnering arrangements to supplement subscription income which is obviously finite. At present we have three Strategic Partners, Knight Frank, Calor and First Group Buses.
7. When SPARSE Rural and the RSP work together (which is most of the time) they do so under the name “The Rural Services Network” (RSN).
8. The network has three main purposes:
 - 8.1 **Representing** the case for a better deal for rural service provision
 - 8.2 **Exchanging** useful and relevant information
 - 8.3 **Developing and sharing** best practice
9. The Rural Services Network exists to ensure services delivered to the communities of predominantly rural England are as strong and as effective as possible.

Membership

10. The membership criteria is those Principal Councils which serve Predominantly Rural areas i.e. those with at least 50% of their population living in rural settlements (rural towns, villages, hamlets and dispersed dwellings) as identified in the Office for National Statistics’ rural definition and including larger market towns as identified in the Defra classification of local authority districts.
11. There are currently 97 Authorities in membership, 11 Unitary Councils, 8 County Councils and 78 District/Borough Councils.
12. Membership requires a subscription which is £2095 for Districts and Counties with a sliding scale for Unitaries based on population

Governance

13. There are three full membership meetings a year. These meetings of SPARSE-Rural are followed by a joint meeting with the RSN.
14. The LGG’s Rural Commission is able to send a representative to these meetings as are each of the LGG’s Political Groups.
15. We seek to meet with Officers of the County Council’s Network at least once a year.
16. The LGG has copies of all Agenda papers and Minutes.
17. A small Executive Group also meets three times a year, jointly with the RSP Directors.

Item 2

18. The RSN circulates by e mail weekly news and analysis information and maintains a website www.rsonline.org.uk. The weekly digests etc are currently sent to some 18,000 people a week and read, we understand, by over 40,000 people.
19. The membership subscriptions, augmented by some income from the strategic partnering arrangements, fund the Group's work which is carried out by a small team with specialist consultants brought in where necessary.
20. The Group is apolitical. There are no Political Group' meetings before our meetings.

Services

21. We provide a range of services to the membership which is briefly set out below:-

Improvement and Efficiency Support

Financial Representation

22. Our primary area of work relates to arguing the case for the rural premium – the fact that serving a rural area costs more. We want government to recognise that fact across funding formulae and other financial support mechanisms. We have 'a seat' at the Settlement Working Group. We are particularly active in this area at this time because we are very concerned about the impact of the public expenditure cuts on service levels that are clearly already restricted. We are carrying out current research with LG Futures and Pixel widening and updating work carried out for us by Rita Hale & Associates in 2006-7.

Performance Profiling

23. Comparison with other rural local authorities allows comparison and evaluation across a range of services. R50 and R80 subsets are also provided.
24. Working with the 'Service Organisations' RSP membership (such as Police, Fire, Health, Housing Associations and Colleges) we get to the dynamics of the "total place" and have carried out detailed analysis down to ward level of the former Place Survey.

Best Practice and Innovation

25. We help to establish and spread best practice information, forming links with other experts in the delivery of services to rural areas. We are working with Birkbeck University in the delivery of specific training opportunities relating to Rural Governance and Service Delivery in the most rural areas. We operate an Academic Network with the leading "Rural Universities", 4 Seminars, and rural practitioner meetings each

year. We have plans, this year, to extend this arrangement to establish rural forums across England.

Influencing

Influencing Parliamentarians

26. We helped to establish the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services to provide a unique opportunity for Parliamentarians to focus on rural services and to raise issues in both Houses of Parliament. We provide the Secretariat for this Parliamentary Group.
27. In 2011 it will be having 5 meetings on First Response issues, (April) Transport, (May) Finance (June) Housing (October) and Health (November)

Annual Report on State of Rural Services

28. In March last year we produced a report detailing the position of a range of rural services, putting service delivery under a national and local microscope. We intend to produce such reports annually – at least for the next three years.

Calls for Evidence

29. We inform Government and those advising Government about the situation appertaining to rural service delivery from the perspective of both the service provider and rural communities.
30. Our membership has provided a lot of the evidence cited by the former CRC in its responses to various government consultations etc.

Informing

Rural Economy

31. Including the quarterly rural seminars, early bird digests on rural legislation and issues, economic profiling and our rural consultancy service.

Community Access and Consultation

32. We work with others to share best practice and generate investigations about “village hubs”, the role of Market Towns and fuel poverty etc.

Research and Analysis

33. Information we collect on rural service delivery and financial profiling analysed and collated with national statistics enabling member authorities to stay ahead of their external auditors.

Rural News and Information Service

34. We provide rural news as it happens – on a weekly and monthly basis through our email newsletters and web forums.

Rural Coalition

35. We are members of the Rural Coalition.

Our Priorities for 2011 and Beyond

36. For SPARSE-Rural our first priority will remain the funding formulae and the impact of the massive public expenditure reductions and their impact on public services.
37. For the RSN our priorities will be to seek to influence Government and Policy Makers across a whole range of issues facing rural service providers and communities. We have set these out in a "Rural Services Manifesto" which we launched around the 2010 election.
38. With the demise of the Commission for Rural Communities and the Regional Development Agencies we seek to introduce a number of important initiatives in 2011-12.
- 38.1 Service Groupings in relation to individual RSP member service areas.
- 38.2 A system of area rural forums across England.
- 38.3 A Rural Policy and Practitioners Group operating across the United Kingdom examining current rural issues and exemplifying best practice.
39. It is our wish to establish an extensive network to assist rural areas in what are clearly extremely difficult times.

Contact officer: Graham Biggs
Position: Chief Executive, Sparse-Rural SIG
e-mail: graham.biggs@sparse.gov.uk