

LGA Special Interest Groups

2014 Annual Report to LGA Leadership Board

SIG NAME, LEAD OFFICER, AUTHORITY AND CONTACT DETAILS:

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1. MEMBERSHIP:

[Note: Only LGA member authorities are entitled to SIG membership]

A.HISTORY

SPARSE-Rural was formed in the early 1990's originally as a District Council Group under the old ADC prior to the formation of the LGA. Interestingly it was the only SIG specifically referred to in the "Prospectus" for the formation of the LGA. It is numerically one of the largest of the Association's Special Interest Groups.

On the formation of the LGA its membership criteria was extended to cover English Counties, Districts and Unitary Councils and it has a healthy percentage of each in its membership.

It now comprises 115 Local Authorities who are detailed on our web site.

The nature of the membership's 'common interest' is all matters relating to living, working and providing services to communities across Rural England.

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 member's areas became of equal focus. We have worked particularly hard the past year through our detailed research and work with an

effective All Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services and with a Parliamentary Rural Fair Shares Group formed by Graham Stuart MP the current Chair of the APPG.

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 100 subscribing members in England from across the non local authority public services, and also from rural interest groups from the private and voluntary sectors. The Arts Council are the latest members.

When the two organisations work together, which they do most of the time, they do so as the Rural Services Network (RSN), one of very few nationwide specifically rural organisations still operating in England.

The RSN 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 towards 10,000 contacts.

We have, with 6 of the former Commissioners of the former Commission for Rural Communities and representatives from 7 other organisations with a rural interest, formed an extra organisation standing apart from our representational work and dealing primarily with rural research. This working arrangement is termed 'Rural England'. It constitutes a further body in the Rural Services Network cluster and reports to the RSN Executive.

B.MEMBERSHIP AND STRUCTURE

With the ending of the Rural Commission earlier this year the Special Interest Group has, with the consent of the LGA Leadership Board, been reorganised this year. The umbrella name for the SIG, as with the organisation as a whole is now the Rural Services Network SIG and there are four sub sigs SPARSE Rural, the Rural Assembly, the Rural Unitaries Group, and the Rural Fire and Rescue Services Group.

They operate as follows:-

SPARSE Rural:- is the grouping primarily concerned with rural LG financial representation. It also looks at performance, neighbourhood planning, and economic evaluation work.

The Rural Assembly:- takes on much of the work previously undertaken by the Rural Commission in that it takes an overview perspective of issues in a rural context. The number of authorities involved will always be greater in this sub sig than those in the SPARSE Rural sub sig which is restricted to authorities who benefit in net gain terms from the rural financial case we are pursuing.

The Rural Unitaries Group seeks to work co-operatively on issues which are common to unitary councils that are either Predominantly or Significant Rural in classification.

Rural Fire and Rescue Services Group:- seek to present arguments common to County and Combined Services operating in areas that have significant rural areas.

There are currently 115 Authorities in full membership of the Rural Services Network SIG, 14 Unitary Councils, 11 County Councils and 90 District/Borough Councils.

Membership involving financial argument (SPARSE Rural) requires a service payment which is £2095 (Predominantly Rural) or £1800 (Significant Rural) per annum for Districts and Counties with a sliding scale for Unitaries based on population. The membership service charge has remained unaltered for the past 6 years.

We believe there are c130 authorities in England possessing common financial interests.

Members with a common rural interest (the Rural Assembly) will, if they have no common net gain financial interest, be required to make a service payment of £495 per annum.

In addition to the 130 authorities mentioned above there are, we believe, some further 120 authorities who it is felt have common rural, socio economic and rural planning interest with the 130 authorities and these 250 authorities constitute the most rural local authorities in England.

The new arrangement now allows all of the previous Rural Commission members to take advantage of the Networks service in one form or other should they so wish.

C. GOVERNANCE

There are three meetings a year of both SPARSE Rural and the Rural Assembly sub groups in March, July and November the formal Rural Services Network SIG has its AGM in November. Each meeting of the Rural Assembly is combined with the RSP membership who wish to attend

The LGA's People and Places Board is able, if they wish, to send a representative to meetings as are each of the LGA's Political Groups.

We are working with LGA Officers and the LGA's Conference and Events team to jointly present the Rural Conference in Chester this September.

We seek to meet with Officers of both the LGA and the County Council's

Network at least once a year.

The LGA has copies of all Agenda papers and Minutes including our amended (draft revised) constitution.

A small RSN Executive Group which steers the Network also meets three times a year, jointly with the RSP Directors.

The membership subscriptions fund the Group's work which is carried out by a small team most of whom are located in Tavistock in Devon with specialist consultants brought in where necessary. As with the LGA to maintain operational stability a year's notice of ceasing membership is required by the constitution to be served by the 31st March in any year.

The Group is apolitical. There are no Political Group' meetings before our meetings.

2. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The following are the terms of constitution that have been approved by the LGA Governance Board and will now go to our next meeting in July.



THE RURAL SERVICES NETWORK SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

Constitution 2014

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CONSTITUTION

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CONSTITUTION

1. Title and Membership

- 1.1 The Organisation shall be known as The Rural Services Network Special Interest Group [“the Group”].
- 1.2 The Group shall be eligible to those authorities who are classified as Predominantly Rural and Significant Rural by the Government and to previous members of the Rural Commission of the Local Government Association.
- 1.3 The Group will consist of such Principal Councils and Fire and Rescue Services in England, as The Rural Services Network desire to be and remain in membership [“Member Authority”].
- 1.4 The Group shall act in a non political way concentrating on achieving consensus views on rural best practice and service interests.
- 1.5 The Group meetings will not be preceded by political meetings.
- 1.6 Those authorities who are eligible to become members of the Group as specified under 1.2 above may instead of becoming members elect to have a straight contractual relationship with the group that is based solely on service provision and is non- representational. Under such a relationship the group will enter into a service level agreement with the authority involved and provide financial monitoring, best practice, performance, community, rural and economic services available for a flat rate annual payment constituting 95% of the charge which would have been levied on the authority had it joined in the normal way. Authorities who elect to take this arrangement will not be formal members and will therefore not be entitled attend or vote at meetings of the Group and will not receive agendas and minutes or be involved in the representational work of the Group.
- 1.7 Whilst all membership shall be with the Group, operationally much of the work of the Group will be through four sub groups; namely SPARSE Rural; The Rural Assembly; The Rural Unitary Councils Group and The Rural Fire and Rescue Services Group

2. Purpose of the Group

- 2.1 To be a voice for councils with a rural interest within the Local Government Association [LGA] and to influence appropriate work so that the views and rural interests of these councils are fully considered.
- 2.2 To research, promote and lobby for the rural interests of communities served by member authorities
- 2.3 To establish in as many work areas as is feasible collective working targeted to the benefit of individual member authorities and their communities including the sharing of best practice.

3. Objectives of Powers of the Group

- 3.1 To provide forums in which member authorities can exchange views and initiate shared activities on issues of common interest/benefit, particularly relating to rural service delivery, rural policy generally and the rural economy.
- 3.2 To raise awareness of the contribution member authorities make to rural service and rural community issues.
- 3.3 To provide greater capacity for member authorities to contribute to and influence the national agenda by direct representation to government departments and other decision makers.
- 3.4 To represent, wherever possible by consensus, the interests of member authorities in national government, to Parliament, political parties, European and other international institutions and other bodies, and the LGA and other decision makers.
- 3.5 To organise collective working to achieve potential cost savings for member authorities
- 3.6 To formulate sound policies and practices in respect of rural issues particularly those relating to rural services and rural communities.
- 3.7 To promote the policies of the Group to national government and other relevant organisations.
- 3.8 To develop relationships with other the LGA Special Interest Groups, with its People and Places Board and with other appropriate Service Boards which may be established from time to time.
- 3.9 To do anything that is calculated to facilitate or is conducive or incidental to the discharge of the objectives of the Group.
- 3.10 To promote innovation and best practice in furtherance of the achievement of greater efficiencies across member authorities.
- 3.11 To work with other Service Providers and those interested in rural services (grouped together as The Rural Services Partnership Limited) and the intended Rural England Community Interest Company and with the RSN Community Group as a section of the umbrella partnership known as The Rural Services Network to represent rural services generally, facilitate best practice and create the strongest network possible in support of continuous improvement of services and well being in general in the rural areas of England.

4. Purpose of Sub Groups

- 4.1 The Group will undertake its work through the operation of a series of Sub Groups

4.2 These Sub Groups shall be named SPARSE Rural, The Rural Assembly, The Rural Unitary Councils Group, The Rural Fire and Rescue Services Group.

4.3 The purposes of the Sub Groups shall be as follows:-

A. SPARSE Rural

This sub group will represent the financial interests of Principal Councils classified as Predominantly Rural and those Significantly Rural authorities which stand to gain by the Group's financial representations.

To promote the financial interests of the most rural local government authorities and to make representations to Government and other relevant bodies on the allocation of funding to the most rural authorities and other publicly funded bodies serving their areas.

To establish comprehensive e networking to allow members to discuss in detail rural considerations relating to the range of service areas they provide and where appropriate for these networks to also involve community representatives and non-local authority service providers to allow service issues to be viewed holistically.

To seek to facilitate collective working across authorities with a view to achieving both maintenance of service and cutting of cost. This to include the financial and non- financial performance analysis and comparison services and service groupings provide through the service charge for this sub group

B. THE RURAL ASSEMBLY

To provide to all members appropriate information on rural matters generally.

To act as a conduit on rural issues between authorities with rural areas and those rural areas themselves with the LGA's People and Places Board and other appropriate Service Boards, with Parliament and Government Departments and with other organisations with a rural interest.

To allow a consensus view to be established on current issues between authorities with a rural interest so as best to inform the LGA's operational structures of the position relating to rural areas in England and Wales.

To facilitate discussions between rural authorities and other bodies with an interest in issues which affect rural areas/communities/businesses in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland with a view to establishing rural best practice and inter organisational learning.

To where possible assist in establishing a rural dimension to appropriate LGA conferences.

C. THE RURAL UNITARIES GROUP

To assist Unitary authorities with significant rural areas in their day to day operation by sharing and collating operational information, by establishing best practice, and by collective working generally.

To identify common financial viewpoints and to argue the case for rural unitary authorities in relation to issues where mutual financial advantage can be established

To examine together proposals affecting services across member authorities and to argue the case found to be of maximum benefit to these authorities

D. THE RURAL FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES GROUP

To seek to achieve maximum linkage between the operation of Fire and Rescue Services in rural areas and the communities involved.

To seek to share operational experience and best practice established through providing services in rural areas

To argue the financial case relating to the additional costs of Fire and Rescue Services operation in areas classified as Predominantly and Significant Rural.

Address the Fire & Rescue Service issues which are unique or more prevalent in rural areas (retained fire service operation, open countryside fires and flooding and accidents involving classified roads are examples.)

5. The Annual Meeting

- 5.1 The Group will meet as an Annual Meeting to appoint the office holders.
- 5.2 The Annual Meeting shall meet towards the end of each calendar year to approve the accounts of the Group, agree the budget of the Group, to set the annual service charges and approve the work programme. Other meetings including where considered necessary Extraordinary Annual General Meetings will be held as required and the meetings shall deal with such other business as may be determined by the Executive.
- 5.3 The Annual Meeting may from time to time make standing orders for the regulation of the Group's proceedings.

6. Membership of Meetings and Sub Group Meetings

- 6.1 The Meetings shall comprise the appointed representatives of the Member Authorities or Leaders of those authorities who have not made such an appointment. Elected members may be accompanied by an Officer of the Member Council if they so wish Meetings of the Rural Services Network as a whole may follow on from Group Meetings and where necessary separate votes may be taken of the Rural Services Partnership's membership. Meetings of the Rural Assembly sub group shall normally be held on the same day and

in the same place as meetings of the SPARSE-Rural sub group.

6.2 The names of members appointed by member authorities to serve at meetings and any appointed substitute appointments shall be given to the Corporate Director in writing by the Chief Executive of their Member Authority (or other officer nominated to act on their behalf) as requested.

6.3 The period of office for members shall normally begin with effect from member authorities Annual Meetings in each year and shall end immediately before their Annual Meeting in the following year, provided that representatives shall cease to be eligible for membership when they cease to hold office as members of their authority or when their authority ceases to be in membership.

6.4 Member Authorities may if they wish appoint different members to serve on different Sub Groups but one member must be named as the representative of the Council for the purposes of Annual Meetings of the Group.

7. Voting at Meetings

7.1 Each Member Authority shall be entitled to cast one vote at all meetings on occasions when it is decided to proceed by vote and a decision is not reached by consensus (which will be usual practice).

7.2 In the case of an equality of votes the Chairman of the meeting shall have the casting vote.

7.3 A member may nominate another member being a currently serving member of any member Authority and attend a meeting on his or her behalf and exercise his or her vote(s) provided that written notice is given to the Director of the Group before the start of the meeting by the Chief Executive or other appropriate officer of the Member Authority or by the originally nominated member.

8. Office Holders

8.1 The Annual Meeting of the Group shall in each year appoint from amongst the members representing Member Authorities the following office holders:

(a) A Chairman;

(b) Vice-Chairmen (The number of which shall be determined by the Annual Meeting making the appointment. One of the vice-chairmen shall be identified as First Vice-Chairman).

8.2 The Chairman and Vice-Chairmen of The Group shall to achieve continuity of overall operation also hold the same offices on the Executive and on the SPARSE Rural Sub Group.

8.3 The Rural Assembly Sub Group, the Rural Unitary Council Sub Group and the Rural Fire and Rescue Services Sub Group shall appoint their own Chair and Vice Chair save that until the Annual General Meeting in 2014 the

Chairman and Vice.-Chairmen of the Group shall also hold the same offices on the Rural Assembly sub group. Nothing shall prevent this situation continuing beyond 2014 if that is the wish of the sub group.

8.3 Voting on all appointments shall be as follows:

Where there are more than two persons nominated for each position, and of the votes given there is not a majority in favour of one person, the name of the person having the least number of votes shall be struck off the list and a fresh vote shall be taken and so on until a majority of votes is given in favour of one person.

8.4 The Chairmen (and in their absence Vice-Chairmen) will have the following responsibilities:

- (a) To promote The Group and Sub Groups as a whole;
- (b) To uphold and promote the purposes of the Constitution and to interpret the Constitution where necessary;
- (c) To preside over meetings so that its business can be carried out efficiently; and
- (d) To ensure meetings are a forum for the debate of matters of common interest.

8.5 The Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen will hold office until:

- (a) The next Annual Meeting of The Group or in the case of the Rural Assembly the Rural Unitary Councils and the Rural Fire and Rescue Services Sub Groups the first meeting in any calendar year
- (b) They resign from the office; or
- (c) They are suspended from being a Councillor under Part III of the Local Government Act 2000; or
- (d) They are no longer a Councillor; or
- (e) They are removed from office by resolution.

8.6 In the event that a Chairman ceases to be the Chairman as a result of Article 8.5 (b), (c), (d) or (e) above the Group or Sub Group shall forthwith appoint a new Chairman of The and pending the appointment of a new Chairman all powers and functions of the Chairman shall be vested in the First Vice-Chairman in relation to the Group and the SPARSE Rural Sub Groups and the Vice Chairman in relation to the Rural Assembly, Unitary and Fire Sub Groups.

8.7 The Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Rural Assembly, Unitary Council and Fire Sub Groups shall be members of the Executive

9. The Executive

9.1 There shall be an Executive whose purpose shall be to provide strategic direction and conduct the normal day to day business of the Group apart from work delegated to the Group's Officers.

9.2 The Annual Meeting shall determine the terms of reference, delegated powers, size and composition of the Executive subject to a maximum of 14 members and may if felt necessary make Standing Orders for the regulation of their proceedings.

9.3 The Executive will where appropriate meet together with the Board of Directors of the Rural Services Partnership Limited and up to 5 further nominees of their choice to achieve overall Rural Services Network purposes. Where necessary separate votes will be taken when formal decisions are required to be made by the Directors of the Rural Services Partnership Ltd.

9.4 The Chairman of the Group from time to time shall be Chairman of the Executive.

9.5 The Chairman and Vice-Chairmen of the Group may nominate another member being a currently nominated member of any member Authority to attend an Executive meeting on his or her behalf and exercise his or her vote(s) provided that written notice is given to the Director of the Group before the start of the meeting.

10. Responsibility for Action

10.1 In matters of local government in general or which concern all member authorities of the Sub Groups, the Group and its Sub Groups will speak for all its member authorities. The Group and its Sub Groups, however, cannot commit their individual member authorities to any particular course of action or to support or not support any particular policy position.

11. Meetings of the Group, Sub Groups and Executive

11.1 Meetings of the Group and Executive shall be held on such days and at such places as may be decided by the Executive.

11.2 The Corporate Director shall ensure:

(a) Not less than twenty-eight clear days before each ordinary meeting including Extra Ordinary Annual Meetings of the Group and not less than two months before the Annual Meeting there shall be posted on The Group's website, a notice stating the date, time and place of the meeting; and

(b) Not less than ten working days before the meeting send to each Member Authority by email or post an agenda specifying the business to be transacted.

12. Nominated Officers and Staff

12.1 There shall be a Chief Executive and a Corporate Director of the Group appointed on such terms and conditions (including via a Contract for Service in respect of self employed persons if deemed appropriate) as the Executive may think fit and such other staff as may be necessary for the purpose of implementing the Group's and the Sub Groups aims and objectives. These staff individually and collectively will support the working of the Group and the Sub Groups.

12.2 The Group and Sub Groups shall where considered necessary ask the Chief Executives of Member Authorities to provide advisors to support the work programme as necessary including financial and strategic service advisers.

13. Finance

13.1 The Executive shall submit for consideration to the Annual Meeting of the Group in each year a statement of estimated expenditure for the year commencing on the following first day of April. The Executive shall have delegated authority to vary the budget within the financial year as necessary – subject to report at the next Group meeting.

13.2 The service charges for each year commencing on the 1st of April shall be at rates to be determined from time to time by the Group and those rates shall vary across groups having consideration to the running costs involved.

13.3 The Chief Executive shall be responsible for the preparation of an Income and Expenditure Account involving the Rural Services Network Special Interest Group and the Rural Services Partnership Limited jointly, each year, for the preparation of Company Accounts by professional tax accountants and for the submission of those accounts to the Group.

13.4 The income and property of The Group shall be applied solely towards the promotion of the Group's objectives.

13.5 The Group may invest, lend, or otherwise deal with monies not immediately required for its purposes in such manner as may be thought fit by the Executive and may borrow or raise money in accordance with financial regulations agreed by the Annual Meeting.

13.6 The Group may purchase, take on lease or otherwise obtain land to provide accommodation for the use of staff provided that if land or buildings are leased from a Member Authority this shall be on a basis that the rent paid is no more than a reasonable and proper rent in the circumstances.

13.7 The Chief Executive and the Director, or in their absence another appointed officer shall be authorised to enter into and execute all instruments, deeds or assurances on behalf of the Group.

13.8 The cost of attendance, travel and subsistence in connection with meetings of the Group and Sub Groups shall be met by the member or officer's own authority. The Group itself will meet those costs in respect of members of the Executive attending Executive Meetings or otherwise representing the Group.

14. Resignation of Member Authorities

14.1 Any Member Authority wishing to terminate its membership shall give not less than twelve months' notice, in writing, to the Director to expire on 31 March in any year.

14.2 Any Member Authority shall, upon ceasing to be a member of the Group,

forfeit all right to and claims upon the Group and its property and funds, and, without prejudice to Article 15, shall pay such amount representing the authority's share of responsibility towards liabilities incurred by the Group on behalf of member authorities, including payments due to contractors, during the currency of the authority's membership, such share to be calculated having regard to the proportion which the subscription paid by that authority bears to the total annual subscription of the Group from its members in total.

15. Dissolution

15.1 A motion for dissolution of the Group must be notified in advance as an agenda item for the Annual Meeting or an Extraordinary General Meeting.

15.2 A motion for dissolution shall require a formal majority of at least two-thirds of members present with at least two-thirds of such authorities represented at the meeting, or through a postal vote procedure authorised by an Annual Meeting decision under the procedures outlined in 16.1 below.

15.3 In the event that the Group's funds should prove to be insufficient to discharge its liabilities Member Authorities shall contribute such additional sum as is required collectively to eliminate the deficiency pro rata to the level of their subscription.

15.4 In the event of a dispute between a member or former member authority and the Group as to the amount which an authority should contribute under this rule the matter shall be referred to arbitration.

15.5 The arbitration shall be conducted in accordance with the Arbitration Rules of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators and the Arbitrator shall be asked to determine the extent to which an authority or authorities should contribute and to determine the matter in accordance with what is fair in all the circumstances. In the event that the Arbitrator issues a determination providing that a member or former member Authority is liable to contribute a specified sum under this Rule the authority shall pay the monies which the Arbitrator determines it ought to pay within sixty days of the issue of the award. The Arbitrator shall be appointed by agreement of Chief Executive and Director or in default of such agreement by the President for the time being of the Law Society.

16. Amendment to the Constitution

16.1 The Annual Meeting (or an Extraordinary General Meeting convened for the purpose) shall have power to amend this Constitution:

- (a) save that no amendments may be made to articles 13.4 or 14.1 and any purported amendments to those articles shall not be effective; and
- (b) provided that a motion in favour of each such amendment shall be passed by at least two thirds of members present and if necessary through the following additional procedures:

Where two thirds of those present vote for an amendment but less than two thirds of Member Authorities are present, then the amendment shall, at the request of the mover, be put to a postal ballot of the membership. The amendment shall be carried if it receives the support of at least two thirds of the ballot papers returned.

17. Urgent Decisions

17.1 The Chairman in consultation with the First Vice-Chairman may take a decision which is a matter of urgency and is not delegated to the Officers. However, the decision may only be taken:

- (i) if it is not practical to convene a quorate meeting of the Executive; and
- (ii) if the Chairman of the Group agrees that the decision is a matter of urgency.

17.2 The reasons why it is not practical to convene a quorate meeting of the Executive and the consent of the Chairman to the decision being taken as a matter of urgency must be noted on the record of the decision. Following the decision, the Chairman will provide a full report to the next meeting of the Group or Executive explaining the decision, the reason for it and why the decision was treated as a matter of urgency.

3. KEY AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

The network now has four main purposes:

- **Representing** the case for a better deal for rural service provision
- **Exchanging** useful and relevant information
- **Developing and sharing** best practice
- **Researching rural issues**

The Rural Services Network exists to ensure services delivered to the communities of Rural England are as strong and as effective as possible.

Our ultimate long term objective remains unchanged. We are working to establish an extensive network of support to rural areas across England in extremely difficult times. Step by step we aim to strengthen and widen that network to help build and maintain resilience in rural areas.

4. KEY ACTIVITIES/OUTCOMES OF WORK UNDERTAKEN

A. SERVICES

We provide a range of services to the membership. These are briefly set out below:-

INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

The RSN circulates by email weekly news and analysis information and maintains a website www.rsnonline.org.uk. The weekly digests etc are currently sent to some 23,000 people a week and we estimate, read by over 50,000 people throughout England.

We have commenced both a monthly opportunities e-leaflet and detailed topic examination bulletins which look periodically at Rural Broadband, Fuel Poverty, Local Transport, Heart of the Village, Older People, Small Businesses, Disability, and Younger People issues.

IMPROVEMENT AND EFFICIENCY SUPPORT

Financial Representation (SPARSE Rural)

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 are particularly active in this area at this time because we are massively concerned about the impact of the ongoing public expenditure cuts on service levels over the next few years that are clearly already heavily restricted. We have carried out research with LG Futures and Pixel widening and updating work carried out by Rita Hale Associates in 2006-7 and we have been pressing Government hard on the issues identified in relation to the 2013-14 settlement and will continue to do so in relation to 2015 -16

Performance Profiling (SPARSE Rural and Unitary)

Comparison with other rural local authorities allows comparison and evaluation across a range of services. SR and R50 and R80 subsets are provided.

Working with the 'Service Organisations' RSP membership (such as Police, Fire, Health, Housing Associations and Colleges, where we are seeking to develop groupings) we get to the dynamics of the "total place" and are looking to carry out detailed analysis down to ward level of the place survey.

Best Practice and Innovation

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 universities in the delivery of specific training opportunities relating to Rural

Governance and Service Delivery in the most rural areas. We have established a very popular annual programme of rural forums and seminars in every rural region of England which are heavily subsidised and available for all members.

We do feel that with different United Kingdom national Assemblies etc. establishing differing policies in respect of rural areas information exchange between practitioners from the four “nations” is important and we have set up a group (- the UK Rural Policy and Practitioners Group) with the help of representatives from Cardiff University, Queens University Belfast and the Scottish Agricultural College to allow information exchange and comparison.

It would be excellent to integrate both national organisations and local authority representatives from UK Local Authorities from across the four home nations into this grouping.

INFLUENCING

Influencing Parliamentarians

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

In 2014 it will be having at least 5 meetings. We wish to develop two of these meetings as annual forums facilitating discussion and debate on rural and financial issues.

We are also involved with the Parliamentary Rural Fair Share Group mentioned above.

Annual Report on State of Rural Services

We normally produce an annual report detailing the position of a range of rural services, putting service delivery under a national and local microscope. This is now the only publication seeking to capture the rural situation on a year by year basis. There will not be such a report in 2014 as we will be publishing our “Rural Manifesto – a Call on Political Parties” ahead of the 2015 General Election.

Calls for Evidence/ Panels

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.

Our membership has provided a lot of the evidence cited by a number of organisations in their reports to Government and in its responses to various government consultations etc.

We are seeking to establish Rural Sounding Boards at both Principal and

Parish/Town Council level.

NETWORKING

We are certain that slimmed down local government needs more and more networking opportunities. With our RSP and Community contacts we do feel we can play a strong part here and we wish to establish new networks specialising on rural experience and expertise in the areas relating to Environmental Health, Public Health, Housing, Economic Development, and Rural Crime. We hope our initiatives in these areas will become increasingly evident.

INFORMING

Rural Economy

Including the regional rural seminars, early bird digests on rural legislation and issues, our economic barometer service and our Rural England consultancy service.

Community Access and Consultation

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

Research and Analysis

We hope that information we collect on rural service delivery and financial profiling analysed and collated with national statistics enables our member authorities to stay ahead. The RSN Observatory is becoming of increasing importance as it widens its fields of scrutiny.

Rural News and Information Service

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

PARTNERSHIPS

We have working arrangements with the RCPU at Defra, with the National Trust, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Countryside and Community Research Institute in Gloucester and with the Chartered Institute of Housing. We hope that by close working with these organisations our overall performance and research packages can be continually improved.

We are members of the Rural Coalition.

B. OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2014 AND BEYOND

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. We need to be in continual dialogue with Government in relation to this.

For the Rural Assembly 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 will set these out in a “Rural Services Manifesto” which we will launch ahead of the 2015 election. We have also assisted in the continued operation of a Parliamentary Rural Fair Share Group which has involved over 80 MPs.

With the demise of the Regional Development Agencies and the Commission for Rural Communities we have sought to introduce a number of important initiatives over the past two years.

- Rural England (now a registered Community Interest Company in its own right).
- Service Groupings in relation to individual RSP member service areas. Housing, Health, Fire, Rural Crime, Transport Groups have all been or are being established.

Creating an array of networking opportunities back into our SPARSE Rural member authorities through the links formed is very clearly the much needed response to the austerity measures. In a sense we wish to create a ‘virtual authority’ with an accompanying bank of experience in this way.

- A system of area forums and seminars across every rural region in England.
- A Rural Policy and Practitioners Group operating across the United Kingdom examining current rural issues and exemplifying best practice.

We will continue to seek to play a significant role in giving voice to rural issues and to provide a significant network to assist rural areas across England and the people who live and work there.

Cecilia Motley

Chairman

Graham Biggs, MBE

Chief Executive