

## Rural Services Network

### Purpose of Report

For information.

Is this report confidential? No

### Summary

This report provides background for members about the Rural Services Network (RSN) and a short update on their upcoming work programme ahead of their Chief Executive Kerry Booth attending the full board meeting.

**LGA Plan Theme:** Supporting local people and places

### Recommendation(s)

**Members are asked to note the background and work programme of the Rural Services Network. Members are asked to consider opportunities for potential collaboration with the Board.**

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## Rural Services Network

### Background

1. The Rural Services Network (RSN) is a special interest group of the LGA. It was established around 20 years ago as a grouping of the most rural councils coming together to campaign for fairer funding. The group has grown over the years to become the national champion for rural services, working to ensure that rural areas have a voice in the national arena. It comprises 86 rural local authorities across England and it also leads the following groupings of organisations:
  - 1.1. Rural Services Partnership – comprising over 220 organisations all with an interest in delivering services across rural communities including rural housing associations, health trusts, national bodies, and smaller charities. [You can view the membership here.](#)
  - 1.2. [Rural Market Town Group and Rural Services Villages Group.](#)
  - 1.3. [Rural Health and Care Alliance – a partnership between the National Centre for Rural Health and Care and the Rural Services Network.](#)
2. The Rural Services Network is managed by an Executive Board, led by Councillor Roger Phillips of Herefordshire Council and includes representatives from local authorities and Rural Services Partnership member organisations.
3. At the People and Places Lead Member meeting in October it was decided the Rural Services Network would be invited to the full board for members to hear about their work and discuss opportunities for collaboration. As such, their Chief Executive Kerry Booth will attend the meeting to present the Rural Services Network's work to date and lead a discussion around next steps for collaboration.

### National Role

4. The Rural Services Network is a national voice for rural services, providing evidence to select committees and Government consultations and campaigning on behalf of rural communities. The group provides the secretariat for the All Party Parliamentary Group for rural services, helping to inform parliamentarians of the key issues for rural communities and support the Fair Funding Campaign group of MPs campaigning for fairer funding for rural areas.

5. The Rural Services Network sits on the following national groupings:
  - 5.1. Defra Rural Impact Forum - to contribute to discussions on the impact of Government policy on rural areas and to raise relevant questions with Government departments;
  - 5.2. Rural Coalition – thirteen national rural organisations that work towards a shared vision of ‘*A living and working countryside*’. The Coalition recently launched its manifesto asks of political parties, [available at this link](#);
  - 5.3. National Rural Crime Network;
  - 5.4. National Centre for Rural Health and Care;
  - 5.5. BT Digital Voice Advisory Group – advising on the switchover of the telephone lines and the impact in rural areas;
  - 5.6. Rural Homelessness Coalition.

## Summary of services provided to member organisations

6. The Rural Services Network provides a range of services to its membership including:
  - 6.1. National Rural Conference – The annual event attracted almost 500 delegates and was held in September online. It encompassed seven sessions focusing on key topics for rural areas. [You can view a short video of the highlights of the event at this link.](#)
  - 6.2. [Annual seminar programme](#) – Each session includes three expert speakers on the relevant topic along with the opportunity for delegates to debate key issues raised.
  - 6.3. Rural bulletin - A round-up of [news stories](#) and key issues for rural service providers delivered weekly to member inboxes.
  - 6.4. Rural Funding Digest – A monthly publication delivered directly to members setting out funding and grant opportunities along with relevant Government consultations.
  - 6.5. [Rural Lens Review](#) – The RSN considers Government’s Strategy or White Papers from a rural perspective including an ‘At a Glance’ summary of the rural implications.
  - 6.6. [Rural analysis statistics](#) available at member council level showing rural comparisons.
  - 6.7. The group coordinates with member organisations to provide a response to Government consultations so that a rural perspective is submitted.
  - 6.8. Research is commissioned into key rural issues, either individually or with partner organisations. In recent years this has included:
    - 6.8.1. [Rural as a Region](#)
    - 6.8.2. [Cost of Living Crisis in rural areas - study](#)
    - 6.8.3. [Cost of Living Crisis in rural areas - survey](#)

- 6.8.4. [Towards the UK Shared Prosperity Fund](#)
- 6.8.5. [Rural Homelessness Research](#)

## Current work and campaign

7. The Rural Services Network is primarily known for its work on fair funding for rural areas. [Research by the Rural Services Network on the current local government finance settlement](#) found:
  - 7.1. Urban councils receive 38 per cent more per head than rural councils in Government funded spending power.
  - 7.2. Rural residents pay 20 per cent more per head in council tax (because of years of underfunding from Government).
  - 7.3. Rural residents get 13 per cent less per head in social care support.
  - 7.4. Urban councils have more discretionary spending available and this year budget to spend double that of rural councils on discretionary services. These are often the services that support the most vulnerable members of our society.
8. The Rural Services Network is working with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services to raise awareness of the current funding situation for rural councils.
9. The Rural Services Network has recently finalised the rural roadmap. This sets out policy asks of the political parties for rural communities ahead of the general election. It has been put together following consultation with the RSN membership. [You can access the Rural Roadmap at this link.](#) The RSN will be formally launching the Rural Roadmap at an event in parliament in January.

## Proposals

10. The Board has a strong record of engaging with key non-metropolitan stakeholders, including those representing rural areas. The prospect of a forthcoming General Election provides a renewed opportunity for the People and Places Board to engage with organisations such as the Rural Services Network, to jointly influence the future policy direction of the UK and ensure rural challenges are considered within policy creation.
11. The [Levelling Up and Regeneration Act](#) makes provision for the setting of levelling-up missions and reporting on progress in delivering them. The Act officially became law from 26<sup>th</sup> October 2023. In clause 3b the Act states “in the course of preparing a statement of levelling-up missions, the Minister of the Crown must have regard to the needs of rural areas”. It is positive to see the rural perspective recognised and it is suggested members discuss with Kerry how the LGA and RSN work with Government to consider the needs of rural areas when measuring the success of the levelling up missions.

## Implications for Wales

12. Many policy areas are devolved, however where the topic allows we will work with the Welsh Local Government Association and other bodies to ensure issues relating to Welsh councils are properly represented and we are aligning our lobbying work where appropriate.

## Financial Implications

13. Any financial implications arising from this work will be met from the Boards' agreed programme budgets and the LGA's improvement grant.

## Equalities implications

14. The Board will continue to highlight levels of deprivation faced by rural communities and build on the work of the RSN to explore policy interventions government can take to strengthen rural and coastal communities.

## Next steps

15. Following a steer from members, officers will follow up any opportunities for collaboration with the Rural Services Network.