

A FIVE YEAR SCHEME TO BETTER SAFEGUARD AND ASSIST PEOPLE WHO ARE, OR BECOME VULNERABLE IN RURAL AREAS BY THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ESSENTIAL SERVICES RURAL VULNERABILITY GROUP.

This is the first report, given its importance and the involvement of both organisations, which is being presented jointly to the Rural Services Network as well as to the Rural England Stakeholders. Obviously this is a new area for both organisations and discussions are ongoing with a range of organisations about this topic. These are the proposals as they stand currently. Any suggested variations will be reported if and as they occur.

1. INTRODUCTION

The phrase ‘safeguarding’ is used by Water and Energy Companies as they seek to give vulnerable customers throughout England special attention. This may be about trying to ensure that supply is continued wherever possible or about special tariffs that may assist customers who are vulnerable. This work is often done with their regulator Ofgem (Energy) or Ofwat (Water). Similar requirements are likely to fall on the telecom and broadband industries sometime in the future with Ofcom as the regulator here.

The main form of assistance to people who are or become vulnerable (including those who only become vulnerable for a period of time) is to enter themselves on a list kept by power distributors and power providers which is known as The Priority Services Register. People here are given, if possible, special attention when supplies are interrupted, or are about to be, by their power distributors and are also kept informed about Fuel Poor Discounts, Energy Saving Schemes, Tariffs, Switching and Home Heating Support by their power providers.

Slowly The Priority Services Register, which was kept separately by a number of organisations, is coming together and it will gradually become a common register for energy and water and probably telecom and broadband in the future

The onus is for people to be aware of the register and through their power distributor provider or Water Company to explain why they should be on the register and get themselves registered.

We believe that the traditional approaches to 'safeguarding' struggle more in rural areas of England.

This is serious, as in rural areas there is a struggle to provide a full range of public services and the austerity cut-backs will have worsened the situation. In rural areas, because of scattered population patterns, undeniably an extra layer of vulnerability exists for a greater percentage of residents than elsewhere in the country.

The position will of course be particularly bad when something goes wrong and services which are normally taken for granted go down.

The demographic position currently is there are significantly more elderly people in rural areas than elsewhere in the country. However the projections for the decades ahead show that gap widening very materially. By 2039 it is estimated 1 in 3 people living in a rural area will be over the age of 65. By then it is estimated that the number of people aged 80 and above will be 11% of the rural population (currently it stands at 6%).

Another worrying statistic relates to the average wage earned in a rural area by people working in the area. It is currently 19 % down on the national average and seemingly falling further back as every year passes. For those tempted to try to get out of that poverty trap by getting a job outside the area they live in the cut backs in subsidised public transport in rural areas has, even between 2004-2014 (mostly before recent austerity cut backs took place) fallen by 40%. No subsidy no service is of course likely to be the outcome.

Consequently the need to get information out to rural residents about things like low income discount and warmer homes initiative is an imperative.

Again, in rural areas, there is a further problem in relation to fuel poverty because properties tend to be older and there is consequently a higher percentage of hard to retain heat, single skin properties, and a lack of scale in rural areas (where properties are more scattered) when attempting remedial schemes. With fuel costs likely to rise back up considerably over the coming decade there is a real cause for concern here as well.

It is easy for vulnerable individuals and families to be hidden in rural areas because, even at the most local scale available, statistical data is likely to include a much more socio-economically diverse mix of people than might be the case in, say, an urban housing estate. Because they are difficult to identify, and their needs are often more difficult/expensive to address, there is a real danger that the needs of vulnerable rural people are neglected. There is certainly much more of a challenge in identifying who they may be and encouraging them to register.

The following table sets out the problem which we feel emphasises the pressing need to do something about this issue.

Specific to Rural Challenges	Comment.
1.Safeguarding- Identify current differences between rural and urban approaches	<p>We believe there are fundamental differences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Spatial targeting of initiatives is easy and cost-efficient in cities, but rural needs are rarely concentrated. (2) Vulnerable groups are scattered and more difficult to identify than in urban centres. (3) Some indicators traditionally used to identify needs are less relevant to rural areas. (4) Difficulties (e.g. with transport) that some rural people face accessing urban-based facilities and help. (5) Lack of information services or points in rural areas. (6) Institutional capacity of bodies that may help vulnerable people can be limited e.g. size, resource.
2.What people are difficult to reach in rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) The very old (2) Low income families (3) Disabled people (4) People with long term health issues (5) Carers (6) Single parent households
3.Why messages are not getting through in rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Many organisations use the same communication line for rural and urban areas. It's called 'mainstreaming'. It's cheaper but not particularly effective. (2) Stoical attitude and reluctance to seek help. (3) Residents without an online presence. (4) Really poor broadband connections can be as bad as no online presence at all as people fail to make proper use of it. (5) It is much harder to target messages when target group is scattered.
4. Smart Meters Technology promises ways of programming usage that can materially reduce fuel bills without any inconvenience to customers. However this can only happen where appropriate wifi connection exists. While smart meters can therefore be introduced in urban areas it is not possible currently in rural areas. The cost of broadband connection may be prohibitive to many and many older residents may not be comfortable with IT.	How can this technology be used to benefit rural areas and the fuel poverty situations that lie there.

We will undoubtedly need the help and support of the Ofgem, Ofwat, and Ofcom regulators here. Rural areas comprise some 75% of England's land mass and about a fifth of its population. Given the rural characteristics we have just outlined it would be a really good sign to see rural areas inputting into initiatives like the Priority Services Register at twice the average rate of other areas - say achieving some 40% of the registered addresses across England. We obviously have no direct access to this confidential register but we suspect that any detailed scrutiny of it would reveal the percentage of rural addresses on it would in fact currently be significantly lower than the 20% of population that would constitute the statistical norm. We would like to work with the regulators and the companies on this. We do think it is vital work and will become more so given the trends we have outlined. We do not think the messages that water and energy companies so earnestly try to get across does in fact currently register as strongly as it should in rural areas.

There are, from our viewpoint, two key areas where after five years (during which time the number of people above 65 and 80 will have increased) we should be able to demonstrate how successful or otherwise the scheme has been

- Is the situation in rural areas better or worse than it was before after examining relevant material?
- Is there indication of involvement of wider lines of communication across rural areas?

2. THE PROPOSED INITIATIVE

We do feel an initiative is urgently required.

We suggest the initiative is for an initial five year period to allow for review and assessment towards the end of it by all involved.

If the initiative can be voluntarily taken up by all in the energy and the water industry we do feel it can consequentially be relatively inexpensive to all the companies we need to be involved.

We appreciate that, particularly in the energy sector, there are large and smaller companies. We would therefore suggest a two tiered approach so that it does not act as a deterrent to any company. The two levels of involvement would facilitate the involvement of all at their own chosen level so that vitally the scheme can achieve its maximum coverage and maximum benefit.

We would propose two forms of involvement.

SILVER involvement as a Supporter of Rural England at a rate of £500 p.a. for the five years.

GOLD involvement at an overall rate of £2000 p.a. for five years.

We of course need to point out that, for Rural England and RSN to be able to carry out what is suggested below, is entirely dependent on the number of members becoming silver or gold members to generate the funding to both pay for the work and to generate additional research funding for Rural England CIC.

Before the scheme commenced we would seek to establish, with the regulators, how the outcomes from the initiatives could be measured, to see to what extent the initiative had changed the involvement of people in the many rural areas of England with issues like registration on the Priority Services Register, take up of Low Income Tariffs, Warm Home Discount opportunities etc. We would welcome being built into the programme periodic reports from Ofgem and Ofwat into the rural statistics so that relevant meetings can monitor progress.

We would make it clear even at this stage that rural areas with their scattered population patterns and the somewhat stoic attitude of many of the 'proud' rural residents are unlikely to be easy. However we do believe that given the clearly growing problems it would be ridiculous if no special initiative was attempted. At the moment we understand that there are no targeted rural initiatives. We do feel the position can significantly be improved and as we later outline we do also believe some parliamentary pressure can be brought to bear.

(We would also plan a separate but similar initiative with Ofcom and the phone and broadband companies. Our instinct at this stage is to keep that initiative a separate one given the relative newness of the question of safeguarding in those sectors).

3. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE PROPOSED INITIATIVE OF THE CREATION OF THE ESSENTIAL SERVICES RURAL VULNERABILITY GROUP.

- (1) THE SILVER INITIATIVE (£500 a year).** Supporters of Rural England become free members as they will, as supporters already, be contributing this amount.

Membership will comprise the **One General Meeting**

It will be one full day General Meeting of an Infrastructure Providers Group a year centred largely on rural vulnerability for all who had enlisted. In this way all infrastructure supporters get input from a small £500 annual contribution and there is the opportunity for discussion about the overall position with everyone. Companies who wish to can then choose to benefit through deeper involvement via membership to the gold level.

All people who had enlisted would also be recognised as full Rural England CIC Supporters and they would receive recognition as such alongside other supporters. The Rural England website and the 'England under a Rural Lens' periodical will outline their involvement.

The agenda for these general meetings, over the five year scheme period, would each year have one of the following considerations:-

Specific to Rural Challenges	Comment
1.Broadband (Difficulties with rural topography and lack critical mass for fibre solutions)	This would be vital work. Technological advances mean nothing if reasonable speed of broadband cannot be achieved. Smart meters schemes are not possible in rural areas currently and this will put people living in rural areas at a severe disadvantage in comparison to people living elsewhere in England.
2.Fuel Poverty (Distinctive rural problems- older housing stock, often single skin, large areas off grid making fuel poverty more difficult to avoid, lack of scope to undertake 'mass' schemes).	Targeted discussion and dialogue needs to be commenced if a rural case is to be taken forward and specifically targeted initiatives undertaken by Government.
3. Considering the latest information on demographic trends and problems arising that will be affecting rural areas	The trends are showing an increasing number of elderly people in rural areas and this is really vital consideration.
4. Rural Vulnerability Day- we are arranging with MPs from Rural Constituencies for there to be a specific parliamentary day annually when a series of sessions would take place on the numerous question of rural vulnerability or safeguarding.	To consider the messages the group want to feed into the meetings on this day and to consider arrangements for the day itself.

(2) THE GOLD INITIATIVE

This will involve specific detailed work on safeguarding and vulnerability issues.

It is hoped that all 12 Water Companies, 11 Distribution companies and the Big 7 Energy providers and a fair number of the larger newer providers as well will all wish to be involved in this.

The cost will be an additional £1,500 per year to achieve this service (making £2000 p.a. in total).

There would be three areas of activity relating to this service.

(a) Officer Meetings

There would be, it is suggested, Meetings twice a year and they would look at the following issues. It is appreciated however that this is a long list and clearly each meeting could probably do justice to no more than three or four of these items which will therefore require pre selection by the previous meeting.

MEETING CONSIDERATIONS

1.Working at a strategic level with national and rural organisations i.e. Water Council, ACRE, and NALC,	Unfortunately many organisations tried to "mainstream" rural. Because of (1) and (2) above it is not that simple. The partners listed here have a specific rural interest.
2.Role of rural roadshows, library van rounds, local shops, pubs , doctors surgeries	The organisation we list and the approach taken will be very different to urban areas. We would seek to keep a list of these opportunities.
3.How do we join up with people also giving similar messages	We suggest one of the three meetings does just that. We do need to use existing conduits as well as creating new "rurally proofed" ones.
4.How do we get parliamentarians from both Houses involved	1. We suggest a specific day a year called a Rural Vulnerability Day (if parliamentarians are agreeable) with campaigning generally on vulnerability. 2. We would also try to arrange for one of the Peers with a particular rural interest to keep the question of rural safeguarding in the forefront of his/her H of L colleagues at all appropriate opportunities.
5.What role do local community websites have to play	These sites are very much on the increase. Parishes are required (by new accountability standards issued by Government) to either have their own website or to be enjoined in a local community site. People will have the most affinity with the parish they live in and will tend to go to that site first and such sites are obvious vehicles for community information.
6.What are the potentials for parish council-local churches involvement	These are the pillars of the rural community. This information needs to be kept fully up-to-date and held centrally. We are prepared to do that, ACRE are a possible work colleague here
7.Absence of advice in very rural areas- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of CAB • Age UK • People in peer groups 	The group needs to consider the appropriate mechanism for rural areas. Lateral thinking is required not conventional communication links.
9.There is an embarrassment factor about seeking help in a tight knit community and therefore consequently lower social support aspirations	Again this is a further area where practical answers are difficult. It is clear though that special consideration needs to be given to this factor.
10. Sheer physical isolation in deep rural areas	Learning from other countries who have even more sparse characteristics.
11. The need to join up all utility providers Local Authorities-Energy- Water- Phone- Broadband so that issues and solutions can be shared	We hope the arrangements on which we are building Rural England will help achieve excellent liaison arrangements.
12. Best practice on community based solutions	These are particularly relevant as they relate to rural areas. Through our Call for Evidence system again we feel we are one important step ahead here.
13. Best use of local authority council tax and water bills one of the few 'official' communications that go to all households however remote in rural locations	Vital that best practice is identified here. Communication in this way may be one of the very few opportunities to reach 'hard to reach' people and families.

14. Amending Legislation/Regulations	To discuss what particular piece(s) of legislation/regulations are pertinent to their rural operation - the group might seek to persuade MPs about both through the vulnerability day or generally.
15. An intended special meeting every two years.	A specific national summit or conference taking place biennially. This large meeting would involve the sweep across representatives from hopefully all rural local authorities, all phone and broadband operators all members of the group to consider 'in the round' the question of rural vulnerability and safeguarding with a view to the creation of as much joined up thinking and exploration as is possible.
16. Surveys by the Rural Panel we are establishing and the Rural Sounding Boards	To establish how well known or used items like The Priority Services Register are.

Discussion in the morning session of these meetings would be structured around comparison of best practice and discussion of any current difficulties being experienced. There would be a sandwich lunch on each occasion. During the afternoon there would be 2 presentations on a particular topic chosen at the previous meeting followed by a short conclusions session. A short paper from Rural England, limited we suggest to some 1500 words, might be provided annually to consider one particular item. Rural England would undertake the agenda service, room booking, lunch, speakers' costs and the commissioned paper and keep open book accounts.

(b) Specific Work To Assist Gold Initiative Members

In addition to bringing together these meetings, we would wish to assist utility companies by undertaking the following operation initiatives for gold members. The progress of the work detailed would of course be governed by the level of membership income generated. A lot of this is RSN work.

Specific to Rural Challenges	Comment
1. Establishing data to provide contact points for all rural parish councils, local churches, parish church councils, and other appropriate contact points.	There are some 10,000 rural parishes. This is detailed but essential work.
2. Establishing data relating to rural websites, getting links for 'safeguarding' information to appear on these sites.	Again there are 10,000 parishes involved.
3. Getting information on the local roadshow approach of rural councils, County Council library van rounds, local shops and pubs, doctors surgeries and schools	Finding out details of how information can be sent out is vital. A truly comprehensive central database has to be built and RSN can incrementally achieve this.
4. Putting together rural neighbourhood statistics to help to identify the geographic spread of 'vulnerable people'	Through the RSN Observatory we will seek to do this.

5. Get details of all the rural community based magazines and local authority newsletters	Again this is a comprehensive central resource we would seek to gradually achieve.
6.Best use of local authority mail shots	We are prepared to try to marry specific messages the gold member companies want to pass on to their customers in local authorities who are in membership with us and, seek to dovetail these messages with mail shots these authorities are sending out . This would be a special bespoke service.
7.Use of RSN Rural Sounding Boards (Youth, Small Businesses, School Governors, and Parish Councillors) and the proportionately selected Rural Panel	We are creating these Sounding Boards and this Panel. This section of the ESRVG will have use of this for rural surveys if they wish to undertake them.
8.Use of the following websites which RSN are responsible for :- www.rsnonline.org.uk www.ruralengland.org www.nationalruralcrimenetwork.net	
The RSN puts out a weekly Digest which goes out to some 23,000 rural email addresses.	For members of the Gold Initiative we will publish once a year a report on their work in specific relevant areas as they wish.

(C) General Initiatives

- (1) As said we very much believe in the establishment of networks to allow the sharing of experience and joint working. We are prepared to advocate as part of this initiative a system where local councils (parish/town) are asked to nominate either one of their number or an outside volunteer from their parish area to link with others in undertaking work and understanding in this particular area. We would also seek to work with the Rural Community Councils in England (and which are based on County areas) in the hope they could reinforce the importance of trying to establish this e-network of local councillors to work on this whole question of rural vulnerability.
As they become established details of local nominees would be provided to Gold Initiative members.
- (2) In relation to the work of the Rural England Infrastructure Supporters as a whole we would also attempt to set up liaison arrangements with one of the larger nationwide volunteer groups such as the Rotary, Lions International or the Round Table to seek whether, through their large and diverse system of membership, they might be able to inform the Group about individuals who, through circumstances beyond their control, could be regarded as vulnerable and encouraged to register on the Priority Services Register.

Monitoring of these measures would be undertaken by the ESRVG Gold initiative members.

PART TWO

FINANCIAL SITUATION

If this scheme can successfully proceed there are potential benefits that can be identified for both Rural England and the Rural Services Network. At the same time risks exist (as is the case with any new initiative) and we have sought to minimise these through the words employed in the offer.

(A) RURAL ENGLAND

There are three meetings to organise and run. We have currently some twenty five 'supporters' from the Water and Energy 'Industries'. We believe there is the opportunity to double that number of what are £500 p.a. contributors (bringing this input to some 50 such Supporters). The commitments requested by the documentation for Rural England are, to run the three meetings outlined (?£2000 a year), and one report on vulnerability a year of about 1500 word length as an outcome document that might be specific to this initiative. This, including the necessary monitoring and evaluation work, might it is estimated be a financial commitment of some?£7000 a year (this estimates to achieving 14 additional supporters). If the number of Supporters could of course be brought to 50 the net benefit to Rural England would be from 36 new supporters (i.e. a gain of £18,000 a year).

(B) RURAL SERVICES NETWORK

The higher financial 'commitment' lies here perhaps. Work in this area involves the establishment and documentation of a fairly extensive range of information. There would be a clear need for an additional full time administrative officer (c18k a year). There would be a need for more Directorial level Management Resource to lead forward this work area. (say c15k a year). This could therefore be a total commitment towards 30k. The potential income of the extra £1500 each from 12 Water Companies, 11 Energy Distributors and the 7 Main Energy Providers is c£50k. A potential surplus of some £20k a year.

In the documentation we have sought to dovetail progress in the scheme with the level of financial support produced. That, we would argue, should limit the financial risk although the more nervous wording that has to be used consequentially does produce perhaps a situation of ambition as opposed to the more desired certainty of outcome.

CONCLUSION

This is a report that it is believed has the capacity to anchor the role of both organisations in pivotal work both inside and outside the rural communities of England. It is in every sense of the word a big report.

The demographics for the future composition of rural communities in England are going to present severe challenges for those communities. We suggest this joint report demonstrates both organisations will act very positively to assist.