



**MEETING OF THE RURAL ENGLAND CIC
RURAL VULNERABILITY RESEARCH PANEL
AND RURAL ENGLAND DIRECTORS**

**On-line via Zoom
Tuesday 29th September 2020 2:00pm – 3:30pm**

MINUTES

Present:

Amy Barker (Green Energy UK) (AB)
Graham Biggs (Company Secretary) (GB)
Professor Janet Dwyer (RE Director) (JD)
Jo Giles (Calor Gas Ltd) (JG)
David Inman (RE Director) (DI)
Nicki Johnson (Western Power Distribution) (NJ)
Rachel Ryan-Crisp (Southern Water) (RRC)
Sally Thomas (Wales & West Utilities) (ST)
Brian Wilson (RE Director) (BW)
Bethan Aldridge (minute-taker) (BA)

Welcome and introduction

BW welcomed everyone to the meeting and quick introductions were given by those present.
GB to Chair this meeting.

1. Apologies for absence

Richard Allcock, (Western Power Distribution), Doug Smith (Green Energy UK), Elizabeth Warwick (Wales & West Utilities), Nigel Winnan (Wales & West Utilities)

2. Notes of previous meeting – 15.01.20 (See Attachment 1)

Notes of the previous meeting 15.01.20 were accepted as a true record.

3. Rural Vulnerability Research Project Brief (See Attachment 2)

BW started by recalling the background to the Project Brief which was agreed pre-Covid. It had not been possible to start the project in late spring/early summer as planned. Obviously, the situation is not an easy one and will require a rethink on how to carry out the project vis-à-vis on-line and telephone surveys and face-to-face workshops.

4. Progress Report and Discussion

BW and GB explained that at this stage, JD from the CCRI (University of Gloucestershire) was working with DEFRA and NICRE on another project which should enable us to “piggy-back” off their project and run our project in parallel. JD’s DEFRA project is expected to progress in the Autumn and look at 8 case study areas. Two pilot studies should be completed by Christmas and the learning from those pilots will shape the approach to the other case studies. It is hoped that the field work will start in January 2021 for both projects with a report ready by early summer 2021.

JD joined the meeting and explained that the DEFRA Study had been subject to multiple delays and that the DEFRA project managers were now trying to catch up on time lost over the last four months. It has been a frustrating process for everyone. There has been no clarity yet on extending the project and JD is putting together further proposals based on a presumption that DEFRA will have an underspend this year and co-funding from Power to Change. This might generate additional funding to boost that from the Research Panel.

The original project proposed by DEFRA was exploring the lived experience of rural communities and rural businesses, which now incorporates the challenges of Covid-19, using an holistic approach to look at the current challenges and contrasting communities. Eight communities were identified and the Defra specification was based on three surveys:

a) Residents’ telephone survey – 10/15 minutes long and based on the responses of 200 people per case study community. The analysis on answers would look at lived experience, challenges/difficulties like education, healthcare, social care, community vibrancy etc. This information will be supplemented with secondary statistics e.g. population size, trends, age profiles, access to services. This would be an overview to look at what patterns emerge and their consistency.

b) Voluntary, community and local government representatives interviews – to take place on-line via Zoom in each community

c) Business survey via an on-line survey monkey approach. Individuals would be approached first and encouraged to complete the survey and then followed up to speak to them if possible. There would be 15 interviews per community.

The two pilot communities to be completed by Christmas will be Pershore and Barnard Castle. After the surveys have been completed, CCRI are looking to put on virtual workshops in the communities with a mix of business and voluntary/community sector people, picking up on some of the issues raised by residents/businesses and the challenges for their communities and economies.

The additional funding from DEFRA should deliver the specific Vulnerability element of the project and relevant case study areas after Christmas. These will draw upon secondary statistical information from the group and combine with focus groups/social distanced groups or on-line workshops (though preferably face-to-face) and also include a financial incentive for people’s time.

GB confirmed that the Rural England project would run in tandem with the Defra case study areas and asked if there was scope for questions posed to be presented to the two pilot areas. Unfortunately, JD noted that it was not feasible with the time-scale given and Defra's survey clearance process, but CCRI could do this as a "bolt-on" revisiting communities in 2021. This would be an approach that DEFRA would be happy with.

A general discussion took place within the group regarding the methodology proposed. Points were raised that vulnerable groups may not be comfortable in attending workshops currently and also that some may be housebound. It was important not to have barriers for this group and to enable them to take part. It was also important to consider carers who may be on shift work.

JD agreed that it was important to look at this whole issue very carefully in the brief. The focus is in-depth on the communities to understand the dynamics of how they work and it would be preferable to gain access to different types of groups. If the capacity and resource is there to have one-to-ones then it could be very useful.

A query was raised about adding questions to the Defra residents survey, particularly in regard to access to energy. Unfortunately, JD noted that the questions have already been moderated and cleared by Defra survey control and are now fixed. It has been a difficult process to manage expectations particularly as DEFRA wanted questions on Covid as well. JD suggested that there could be input into the questions for individual interviewees.

The panel also discussed the type and size of communities that are included in the DEFRA project and whether they covered their organisation's geographical areas. JD explained that the communities are chosen based on their local authority unit, but the project will be looking at all settlements in those areas and not just the main (more urban) one. GB requested a definition of the areas to see to what extent it covers the areas required. It was recognised that, on vulnerability, a case study area was needed in the Southern Water area (probably Storrington).

JD is in discussion with DEFRA re extra funding and knows that Derek Egan, (DEFRA), is very keen to make this work. JD will talk to her counterparts in the University of Newcastle re a proposal and anticipates a decision within three/four weeks from DEFRA. JD noted that the synergy of working together with DEFRA is beneficial for them and they see the value in it. If DEFRA does not wish to fund this, then we will see how the funding could be split. The focus of the additional work should be on what will provide the most value for this group.

Discussion took place on the reporting of any results from the project and it was agreed that JD would provide a power point presentation of the key summary take-outs. The initial evidence review part of the brief would be undertaken by Rural England CIC. JD would hold bi-laterals with everyone on the Panel group to cover all key points and issues and any specific regional concerns. GB suggested that a colleague, Dan Worth, would discuss with each panel member the data they already hold and that has been identified by JD.

Action: JD to provide a short note outlining the eight communities in the DEFRA project plus a longer list of communities that have been considered. The note will also include the methods of surveys and the outcomes. (see Addendum re community areas)

Action: JD to let the panel know the results of discussions with DEFRA with regard to additional funding etc.

Action: BW to re-draft the project with timings once JD had heard from DEFRA.

Action: JD to contact panel members re specific issues.

Action: BW to contact panel members re data they hold.

5. Any Other Business

GB informed the panel that, in discussion with BW and DI, it has been agreed to take a fair and reasonable approach and not to invoice them for 2021/22 until this vulnerability project has been completed so the panel can first see an output from their Year 1 support.

Meeting closed at 3:20pm

Addendum:

Short list of community areas:

North: Keswick, Shildon, Alnwick and Barnard Castle.

South: Pershore, Minehead, Thrapston and Bridgenorth.

Long list of community areas:

SW England – Minehead, Holsworthy

SE England – Storrington

E Midlands – Thrapston

W Midlands – Bridgnorth, Pershore

NE – Rede valley, Stanhope, Barnard castle, Alnwick, Shildon

Yorks – Pocklington

NW – Ulverston, Keswick