



MEETING OF THE RURAL ENGLAND CIC SUPPORTERS AND RURAL ENGLAND DIRECTORS

On-line via Zoom

Thursday 22nd April 2021 11:00am – 12:30pm

MINUTES

Present:

Graham Biggs (Company Secretary) (GB)
Dan Edwards (Scotia Gas Network) (DE)
Jo Giles (Cadent Gas Ltd) (JG)
Jill Hendry (Electricity North West) (JH)
David Inman (RE Director) (DI)
Beth Kennedy (Anglian Water) (BK)
Emma Merritt (Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks, SSE) (EM)
Bobby Preston (SP Energy Networks) (BP)
Rachel Shorney (SP Energy Networks) (RSh)
Richard Spence (Severn Trent Water) (RS)
Jane Wilkie (SP Energy Networks) (JW)
Brian Wilson (RE Director) (BW)
Bethan Aldridge (minute-taker) (BA)

1. Welcome and introduction

BW welcomed everyone to the annual meeting and quick introductions were given by those present.

BW explained that the annual meeting was to say a thank you to the Supporters, as without their financial support there would be no Rural England CIC, and to outline what had been done in terms of research.

2. Apologies for absence

Prof Janet Dwyer (RE Director), Amy Barker (Green Energy UK), Ian Cass (Forum of Private Business), Jennifer Davies (SP Energy Networks), Peter Emery (Electricity North West), Andy Griffiths (Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks, SSE), Dr Jane Hart (RE Director), Vanessa Mallinson (Severn Trent Water), Fay Morris (SP Energy Networks), Ellie Patey (Western Power Distribution), Amanda Phillips (United Utilities), Carole Quinn (United Utilities), Kate Robbins (Wessex Water), Claire Smith (Wessex Water), Doug Stewart (Green Energy UK), Anna Symonds (Wessex Water), Ash Robert (Yorkshire Water)

3. Minutes of previous meeting – 20.07.21 (see link)

<https://ruralengland.org/notes-of-rural-england-supporters-meeting-held-on-monday-20th-july-2020/>

Matters arising from the notes of 30.04.2019 regarding an annual dinner with MPs.

GB apologised again as events had been overtaken with Covid. It was unclear at this stage when Parliament would be open for non-Parliamentary visitors. If the Supporters were still interested in holding this then more up-to-date costings of a dinner would be needed.

JG suggested looking at different ways to hold such an event eg “virtual dinners” with hampers sent to key attendees. JG had recently attended such an event and RSh was fully supportive of this approach. GB noted that we would need a strong agenda to attract attendees.

Action: GB to look further into this option and BA to contact JG and RSh on how this works.

4. Rural England work in 2020/21

- its supporters, stakeholders and research activity

BW explained that Rural England CIC’s aim is to inform better policy making and it does this mainly through research in-house or with associates. It hopes to build an evidence base about rural areas, communities and economies and is keen to encourage and share evidence of research from others.

There is a Stakeholder Group made up of over 30 national organisations who are a broad-span of rural interest groups. The Stakeholder Group provides a steer for the research activity and the Supporters’ Group tie us into vulnerability. Without the financial support the Supporters’ offer then there would be no research undertaken.

BW worked through a PowerPoint presentation based on current and planned research activity. Please see attached presentation.

a) Rural Proofing for Health Toolkit

This was a core project for last year, was a joint commission with the National Centre for Rural Health & Care (NCRHC) and was launched on 9th December 2020. This toolkit has been created to help organisations working in the health and care sector to address the needs of their local rural populations when they develop or review strategies, initiatives and service delivery plans. There has been a positive reaction to this from health bodies and we are currently working with a number of ACRE members (Cirican) and their NHS partners to run local pilot projects applying the toolkit:

<https://ruralengland.org/rural-proofing-for-health-toolkit/>

b) Rural Net Zero Inquiry

This piece of work has now concluded. It was a “think-piece” reviewing current policies and looking into the opportunities and challenges for rural communities and businesses.

The report has been commissioned and funded predominantly by Calor with support from the National Housing Federation and English Rural Housing Association. It will be a main plank of the Vulnerability Day agenda planned for 24th June.

c) **Rural Vulnerability Project**

This piece of research will look at the experiences of rural, vulnerable utility customers to identify and understand their issues, drawing out rural-specific lessons. It has been funded by the following Utility Supporters: Cadent Gas Ltd, Green Energy, Southern Water, Wales & West Utilities and Western Power Distribution plus Defra.

d) **Rural Arts Touring Schemes**

A commissioned piece of research by Coventry University was turned into a summary of usable messages for the National Rural Touring Forum.

e) **State of Rural Services 2021**

The 2021 report was commenced and will have a focus on the impact of Covid-19 on service provision and recovery plans for rural areas. Link to the draft project plan [here](#)

There have been some challenges and delays to project work due to the pandemic but we have been able to continue with them. The main casualty was the Vulnerability Day in Parliament normally held in the early part of the year as we were unable to hold it. We will however, be holding this year's Vulnerability Day on-line and in June. Details will follow very soon.

GB commented that although there have been these challenges, we have still been able to hold a successful launch on-line of the Health toolkit. Since the launch, Rural England has been working with Cirican to provide training on the toolkit and encourage uptake. GB noted that we are hopeful of funding from NHS Health Education England to run the pilots referred to above, and this would mean endorsement from a large NHS organisation for the toolkit.

DI noted that the work undertaken in 2020/21 is an illustration of the range of topics/research we have been able to cover across rural areas.

5. **Rural England's plans for 2021/22**

Priorities and Next Steps

a) **Rural Net Zero Inquiry**

The report has now been completed and the launch will take place on 24th June at the planned Vulnerability Day.

b) **Rural Vulnerability Project**

This project is underway but not completed as yet and then the report will be written up.

c) **State of Rural Services 2021 (SORS)**

Every 2-3 years, Rural England CIC produces a report looking at themes and policy trends and this has previously drawn a lot of national media attention. The 2021 report will have a focus on the impact of Covid-19 on service provision and recovery plans for rural areas and its communities. It will also test whether any changes are permanent or will communities go back to how they used services previously. Included in the report will be a survey of almost 1,000 residents who are members of the Rural Panel. It is hoped that the report will be published at the end of 2021.

BK commented that Anglian Water would be interested in the results of the Rural Vulnerability Project and thought the research findings will be very important. BK also expressed an interest in becoming involved in any follow up work eg looking at digital exclusion and how can utility companies be more responsive to residents etc.

JH agreed that digital access and skills is the work that Utility Groups are involved with currently for their most vulnerable customers. RSh confirmed that although holding virtual meetings has benefitted many and allowed more people to take part, the knock-on effect on rural communities and staff has been that those with poor connections etc have felt excluded. Moving forward it is important to accommodate everyone not just those with good wi-fi. RSh was also very keen to see the outputs from the Vulnerability and SORS reports and would like to work together.

BW agreed that it was important when communicating with customers eg on new technologies that some in rural areas were excluded from this information. It had been noted from some of the research that customers were confused/concerned about investing in new technology when they felt that they did not have enough information etc. RSh commented that they were aware of this particularly in the light of hydrogen and heat pumps etc. and providing information to Housing Association tenants who were concerned about the initial costs and worried about any increases in costs once installed etc. It was a huge piece of communication work anyway but made much harder for rural areas with poor wi-fi signals etc but they are trying to find solutions and work together.

GB raised at this point, the three levels of Utility Supporter membership ie basic/standard membership, extended services (which includes us being represented at Vulnerability panel meetings), and finally membership of the Research Panel group for £5K whereby Supporters are able to commission/approve specific pieces of work.

Both extended services and panel membership give Supporters membership of partner organisations ie Rural Services Network (RSN) through the Rural Services Partnership (RSP) and Rural Health & Care Alliance (RHCA). Other work is undertaken by these bodies and via the RSN includes responses to government white/green papers, through a rural lens, and being able to pick up at an early stage any potential issues for rural areas and track them.

Rural England CIC as a research organisation is able to point out areas of concern so needs these partner organisations who are able to “lobby” and make presentation to government and ministers.

6. Roundtable session - Supporters to provide a brief update on research/developments and any rural service delivery messages not least as a result of operating during Covid-19 and the restrictions.

BW wanted to know if communication with vulnerable customers has been made harder with Covid-19.

Cadent – JG confirmed that yes there has been an impact but it has also brought about new ways of working. There have been some limitations ie when working with the shielding group

and knowing who they were. Now, everyone is more aware of digital exclusion as well as additional needs of customer so is looking at different ways to do this. There is a real need for greater consistency and not to leave any customers behind. Central services are changing and having an impact. There are some good examples but a need to identify what is best for each individual customer.

Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks – EM also agreed that last year had certainly been a challenge and that SSE had stopped a lot of non-essential work. Staff in these areas were re-trained to call PSR customers and understand better their needs and explain what to do in a power cut etc. They also worked with pharmacies, grass root organisations and local parish councils providing support. Customers were aware that they were trying to help. Following on from this approach, more customers have raised queries on how new energy efficient technology will affect them particularly as they are unable to use village halls for meetings etc. As quite a number of customers were not of the “digital generation” many found that the calls were really helpful, particularly for those who were lonely.

7. Any Other Business

No items were raised.

BW thanked everyone for taking part in today’s meeting and for sharing feedback. If anyone has any queries, please do get in touch.

Meeting closed at 12:13pm