

MEETING OF RURAL ENGLAND CIC

BOARD OF DIRECTORS On-line via Zoom

Thursday 1st July 2021, 2pm – 3:30pm

MINUTES

Present:

Brian Wilson (Chair) (BW)
Professor Janet Dwyer (JD)
Andy Parker (AP)
Graham Biggs (Company Secretary) (GB)
Bethan Aldridge (minute-taker) (BA)

1. Apologies for Absence

Chris Cowcher (CC), Dr Steve Emery (SE), David Inman (DI)

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting (Attachment 1)

Minutes of the previous meeting, 19.04.21, were accepted as a true record.

GB noted that under Item 7 the Business Plan and Risk Register that he should have asked for them to be approved at the meeting and this was accepted.

3. Matters Arising

a) **Item 4 Directors' Report** will be put onto the Rural England Website once it has been adopted and has come back from the accountants.

b) **Item 7 Business Plan and Risk Register 2021-24 (Research roles)**. GB and BW draft roles still to be done and will be discussed further in the meeting.

c) **Item 8 Stakeholder Chair/Vice Chair replacements**. A job description has been agreed for both roles, will be discussed at next Stakeholders' meeting (12.07) for years 2022/23.

4. RE Budget Report with actuals to 31st May 2021 (Attachment 2)

GB noted that First Group's support income had now been received and was reflected in the June report. On Expenditure Line 79, a £6K budget had been set aside for the Rural Vulnerability Day and although it was not spent, this year, GB would like to leave that money to have a robust budget for the SORS report launch and use it to engage Lexington. Also, currently looking at a £20K carry forward.

Action: Agreed to keep the £6K in the budget.

5. Project Pipeline Review – June 2021 (Attachment 3)

BW updated the meeting on progress.

Rural Proofing for Health Toolkit - BW confirmed that currently the work with Cirican has been down graded as although some initial success in sign up, others in the Cirican group have had useful conversations but not take up to date due to pressures within the local health care organisations approached.

BW was delighted to report that he has been invited to a webinar run by the WHO to give a presentation on the toolkit as part of a rural briefing slot (which includes South Africa and Chile).

GB commented that Rural Services Network has just written a Rural Lens document on the Health White Paper and a link to the health toolkit will be sent to the Secretary of State.

Rural Net Zero Inquiry – To discuss later on in meeting under item 6.

Rural Vulnerability Research project – A meeting of the Research Panel took place on 30th June. The research has some interesting data coming through. There will be one more push for interviews before writing up the report in August.

Action: GB noted that this project was funded by the Utility Group for 2020/21 but need to find out what they would like to do next in 2021/22.

State of Rural Services 2021 – Most of the existing evidence has been reviewed and written up with just a couple of gaps. The Rural Panel Survey has now closed with approximately 600 responses. BW will be meeting with Dr Matt Reid (CCRI) in Mid-July to discuss these. Current RSN survey is still live and has targeted the Market Towns Group.

JD commented that it was important to think about the bigger DEFRA project too. The fieldwork was nearly finished and DEFRA would be publishing the outcomes probably towards the end of the year. There had been issues in regard to interviews due to Covid and collating the evidence but hopefully there will be access to data sets from September. BW thought there was enough research for another Rural Vulnerability Day but only launch one report. He would like to get SORS out before the end of 2021 and JD agreed that it should be published before the DEFRA report.

Action: Potentially launch SORS21 report in November 2021 or January 2022.

Impact of Rural Touring Arts on Loneliness, Isolation and Wellbeing – Nothing further to add at this stage, as before, the project will go ahead if the money is raised.

Discussions took place regarding other potential research projects but with the caveat of the availability of researchers. CCRI in parallel with NICRE has done a piece of work which has been business focused to get a national picture with a rural cut. JD said there was scope to work in partnership on some credible, independent research and maybe Calor could be a contributor of information; rather than a funder.

JD also discussed that NICRE will put out an “open call” in January 2022 with match funding. JD thought Rural England may wish to put in a bid and this could include another partner to widen the scope. The funding is £15-20K max per project with no requirement to match.

Action: JD to find the text for the open call and give examples of funding projects etc

Action: BW to look at the next project after SORS and has to be on business.

AP noted that once the Government’s Heat and Buildings Strategy has been published, Calor could write a brief on this. Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP had alluded to the possibility that rural areas may not be the first area to undertake off-grid gas/oil decarbonisation; and this would be welcomed by Calor. AP agreed that some independent research is required before homeowners spend money on upgrades/retrofits etc. JD confirmed that NICRE could match fund this Rural England research if it focuses on domestic and business and AP agreed. May decide to wait until COP26 before starting research.

Action: AP to draft a scoping document and meet with JD.

6. Rural Vulnerability Day 2021 – review of event

AP stated that as a funder and a Director for Rural England, he thought the day had been good, with interest in the topics and high attendance. He had subsequently had a meeting with Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP which had been very good. It was rewarding to be arguing the same point etc. AP also thought the messaging from Mickledore and Calor was a good balance, showed independence and highlighted there are issues that will come through the rural pathway.

GB noted that there was a higher attendance at the virtual event than there has been at person-to-person events. This included civil servants' attendance and subsequently, DEFRA has asked if it's policy team can attend RSN seminars. We have gone beyond reports from just Rural England CIC and have the ability now to say to Stakeholders that they can launch reports/present on recently launched reports too as long as they are relevant to the main Rural Vulnerability Day topic.

BW thanked BA and the RSN team for their support in putting on the launch event and thought another event in November 2021 would be ideal.

GB asked AP if he would be happy for report to be sent out to Ministers etc and AP agreed.

Action: Presentation slides to be sent to Ministers

7. Business Plan and Risk Register 2021-24 (Attachments 4 & 5)

BW was pleased to confirm that the Business Plan was still relevant and there were no changes to note. With the Risk Register, there was an impact in the People section re associates. GB thought that there was no need at this stage to make any changes. However, it will be updated, if there are any changes, when the Directors next meet and BW agreed as it will be clearer then what projects will be followed up on in September.

7a) Potential Researchers (Attachments 6 & 7)

Rural England was formed to ensure relevant rural research work was still undertaken. Currently, DEFRA is funding research and NICRE and Rural England are linked into these and have to be mindful if there is still a role for Rural England CIC. GB said that Rural England CIC would still be needed for the SORS report and other research that no-one else would pick up.

BW, as a lead researcher, is fundamental to the management of Rural England and a lead partner in research work but wishes to cut back on research work from 1st April 2022. BW is keen to stay on as a Director but step down in his role as Chair of Directors. GB and BW agreed that they need to identify whether or not they need someone to replace BW and be a core researcher to continue with projects, for there to be a contractual relationship and they need to be integral to driving through other projects, or if it is a case of needing associate researchers for extra operational research support.

Action: Wider discussion needed re the scope of the Lead Researcher role and the associate researchers needed and with more Directors present.

Action: GB and BW to write up a discussion paper, ask JD to look at it, with 2/3 options. The core role would be the SORS report, and the Lead Researcher may manage any other associate researchers.

Action: When the options have been agreed, an advert will be raised and pushed out to the Stakeholder group and a shortlist drawn up. JD to ask NICRE to push out advert to their networks too.

Action: BA to contact the 2 potential researchers and explain that the roles are being reviewed and that we will be in touch.

8. Any Other Business

JD informed the meeting that Dr Matthew Reed had been appointed as her replacement at CCRI.

Next meeting: End of August 2021 to be arranged.

Action: BA to take a Doodle poll and confirm a date.

Meeting closed at 3:30pm