

FUTURE OPTIONS FOR RURAL ENGLAND CIC

Paper for Rural England Directors meeting on 16th August 2021

At their last meeting those Directors who were present briefly discussed future options for Rural England, given that one of its two in-house researchers (Jane Hart) had recently retired and the other in-house researcher (Brian Wilson) plans to scale back his workload from Spring 2022. The issue of research capacity is already flagged on the Rural England risk register and it is now one that needs to be addressed. It was agreed that a note with some options should be written for a wider discussion at the following meeting.

Over the last couple of years Rural England has resourced its research work through a mix of in-house capacity (i.e. Directors with research expertise) and external associates (i.e. a freelancer, a university and a small consultancy). In some cases, those external associates have simply added expertise or capacity to a project team e.g. Rural Proofing for Health Toolkit, whilst in other cases they have managed the entire project e.g. Rural Vulnerability project and Rural Net Zero inquiry. However, it should be noted that even the latter approach has required some in-house resource to negotiate and oversee contracts. At risk, therefore, is both the ability of Rural England to carry out research and its ability to manage research.

Three options are outlined below. There may be others and Directors are welcome to suggest them. These options are for discussion and some course of action needs to be agreed, so that the issue can be properly planned for and addressed in good time. Realistically, a new approach or a replacement person needs to be in place from Spring or early Summer 2022.

Option 1 – A managed closure

Rural England would be wound up over the course of the next year or two in a planned way. Its current body of research would be completed (and one or two new commissions may still be possible if they can be completed in time). Beyond that, the aim would be for future State of Rural Services reports to be managed by and funded through the Rural Services Network. If utility companies agreed, the vulnerability work could also transfer to RSN or another body. The same would apply in respect of Calor's funding. That said, the RSN would need to acquire some research capacity to take on these commitments.

Pros: this would be a relatively easy course of action. Rural England can be proud of what it has achieved during the past six years. The gap that it set out to plug, in rural evidence, is arguably now reduced with an increase in Defra research funding and given the NICRE initiative.

Cons: reports published by the Rural Services Network risk being seen as lobbying material (which was a reason why Rural England was set up in the first instance). Rural England has done well raising funding for research from its supporters and this income might be lost. The networking on rural research/evidence through the Stakeholder Group would likely be lost.

Option 2 – A replacement in-house researcher

The role currently (largely) carried out by Brian would be advertised through the Stakeholder Group, among universities with rural departments and among known freelancers/consultants. A chosen replacement would be contracted both to carry out in-house projects, such as the State of Rural

Services, and to oversee projects commissioned from external associates. Work being carried out by Rural England could broadly continue in its current form.

Pros: a new researcher would bring fresh ideas and skills to Rural England's portfolio. They would also enable the organisation's current working model to carry on in much the same format. As such, Rural England could continue to seek new projects or commissions, so long as they were within its research capacity.

Cons: inevitably there is risk, whether the replacement person lives up to expectations, given they would be central to the future operation. It is unclear whether such a role has much appeal and would be filled, since it would be rather undefined in terms of research content and workload (and hence income). The person would probably need to have another income stream and flexibility. A minimum level of income might need to be assured to underpin the State of Rural Services work and any overhead costs from seeking new commissions.

Option 3 – A rural research clearing house

Rural England would switch to a very different model of operation, whereby it seeks and develops research opportunities, but does not attempt to carry out any in-house. Instead, it would source appropriate academic or private consultancy bodies to deliver the projects. Rural England would retain some oversight, to ensure project delivery and quality control, but would leave project management to others. It would charge an overhead for this service to fully cover its costs and perhaps to fund maintaining stakeholder engagement.

Pros: it would probably enable work such as that carried out for Calor and the utility companies to be continued, since that is essentially outsourced now. Rural England has already demonstrated an ability to raise modest amounts of funding for new research from the private sector.

Cons: this is an untried and untested model of operation. It is not at all clear whether it would appeal to those funding research projects and whether it could meet its costs. Realistically, one or more people would need to be paid to manage the processes. It is unclear whether this option could fund the State of Rural Services. Rural England becomes more of an administrative body than a research body – is this what we want?

This is a significant decision for the future sustainability of the organisation and one where there is no easy solution. However, doing nothing is not a realistic option, since inaction would gradually leave Rural England without the capacity to deliver or manage research. We are already at a point where it appears unwise to actively seek additional research commissions.

Directors are, therefore, asked to agree on a preferred option or – failing that – to at least agree a route forward that will lead to a fairly rapid decision. One way forward would be to treat option 1 (managed closure) as a fallback or plan B, but in the meantime to pursue option 2 and see whether we can find a replacement in-house researcher. Subject to Directors' views, a 'role description' for the replacement person could be drafted for discussion at the next meeting.

Brian Wilson and Graham Biggs

5th August 2021