

MEETING OF RURAL ENGLAND CIC

BOARD OF DIRECTORS On-line via Zoom

Monday 16th August 2021, 2pm – 4pm

MINUTES

Present:

Brian Wilson (Chair) (BW)
Chris Cowcher (CC)
Professor Janet Dwyer (JD)
Dr Steve Emery (SE)
David Inman (DI)
Andy Parker (AP)
Graham Biggs (Company Secretary) (GB)
Bethan Aldridge (minute-taker) (BA)

1. Apologies for Absence

None – all attended

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting (Attachment 1)

Minutes of the previous meeting, 01.07.21, were accepted as a true record.
BW noted that the spelling of Matt's surname was not consistent – should be Reed.

3. Matters Arising

a) **Item 5 Project Pipeline Review**, BW to look at the next project after SORS. BW not done this as yet as he wished to get a clearer picture after today's meeting plus, he wished to have a full draft of SORS available before moving on to the next project.

4. Approval of the 2020/21 Accounts (Attachment 2)

GB raised that there was a Corporation Tax Liability last year due to the Covid situation. This has been due to expenditure on travel/subsistence being much smaller than usual and therefore became a profit. The Corporation Tax Liability is £564. CC thanked GB for his work on the accounts, seconded by BW.

Action: The accounts were approved and signed off formally by the Directors and TaxAssist re-appointed.

5. RE Budget Report with actuals to 31st July 2021 (Attachment 3 and 3a)

GB noted that the budget report (Attachment 3) is in the standard format and at the end of the last financial year, there was a balance of £32K which (for RE) was a large balance being brought forward. This year the balance is more likely to be £20K which reflects expenditure on another project for the Utility Research Panel (even though it is not known as yet what that will be) and another on the Calor research.

To have a more accurate picture of what monies are available in the budget for research work, paying researchers etc, GB shared Attachment 3a. Ignoring Parts 1 and 2 as they roughly offset money in and

money out, there is approximately £52K in income, with running costs, paying for RSN staff time to undertake Vulnerability Panel meetings and the Parliamentary Launch totalling nearly £20K.

Research section shows approximately £29K available for research activity and this allows, depending on which option is decided on in Item 6, approximately £20K to pay for a Researcher and allowing £10K for external support. The budget is very tight and would not need much of a shift in Supporter income to reduce this. The Researcher would undertake all the pre-research/abortive work, manage projects, attend Directors' meetings etc. GB looked at the existing budget and looked to see how this could be reapplied towards a researcher and research associates. This also assumed that the Researcher was not an employee otherwise there would be NI and pension contributions to consider as well.

JD thought the figures were fine as they stood but that there were other tasks that needed to be taken into account when costing this out. The Researcher would not just be undertaking research but the house management of the research too and that £1500 for pre-research was probably not enough. DI agreed that the budget shows that Rural England is run on a very tight budget. SE suggested that the Researcher may be able to generate income. GB agreed but that there is limited capacity as the budget stands for this.

JD also considered that the figure of £20K was too small to employ someone on in a senior research role, so you would be looking at contracting the position. She thought the Directors should consider a model on the lines of a partnership arrangement whereby the experienced Researcher has a minimum guaranteed level of work and that part of the job role was to generate research projects through the contacts and meetings they have on behalf of Rural England. If more work came in, then they could either increase their contract or sub-contract the research work out if they didn't have the capacity themselves. Also, would need to consider timescales ie a contract on a year-by-year basis or a first year guaranteed amount and then negotiate in future years plus a probationary period/breakout clause. As the budget is very tight, it may be that the contract would not go on for many years but as a gesture that if there is work then seek to extend the contract into the future.

BW commented that JD had made a number of good points and that if the Directors agree to go down the route of a replacement Researcher, then it would be sensible to "de-risk" the contract from both sides, eg reassurance regarding the volume of work in the first year and breakout clauses etc.

6. Main item – Rural England Future Options (Attachment 4)

BW noted that this has been on the Risk Register for some time now and the time has come to look at options in Attachment 4 or if there are any others that the Directors would like to discuss.

SE commented that although in Item 5 the discussion has been around how we would proceed to have a new Researcher, we did not address whether there was a need to proceed down this route and if there was still a role for Rural England CIC to exist and if so does it need to have the same remit/role. SE was interested in the views of the Directors who had been there from the start of Rural England on this.

GB confirmed that Rural England had been set up through the sponsorship of Rural Services Network (RSN) because research work undertaken by RSN was not being received well in Whitehall and perceived as lobbying. Also, the CRC had been closed down and DEFRA had no research budget. The situation has changed now, in that DEFRA has more of a research budget and the set-up of NICRE and there is now a query re the need for the company in its present form. However, no-one else would do the SORS report and there is still an important role for Rural England CIC in rural advocacy. If it was agreed to close Rural England, then its activities could revert back to RSN but we would need to talk to funders and supporters to make sure they were happy with this. It would mean that RSN would have

to do something in terms of its research ability as well.

GB thought it would be difficult to advertise for research roles and that it might be better to approach people and to look at the two researchers that had made themselves known already.

JD also noted that it is not just the publicly funded research arena that is more active now but that the third sector has become a lot more active as is evident from Stakeholder meetings. All these organisations have decided that it is worthwhile doing this research even if there is a risk of potentially being seen as impartial because they may not have a purely research identity. We would also need to consider the vulnerability of RSN taking back this work in Option 1 and to ensure that SORS continues.

AP agreed that in the time he's worked with Rural England, he has seen some great output from it. He thinks that currently, rural areas are going through some of their biggest changes and that monitoring the impact of these changes is vitally important. The ability to have an independent view on how energy/heat provisions for homes and businesses in rural and off-grid areas is important to hold the government to account for the decisions and actions they've taken. AP thinks it is important to produce work that has an impact, is listened to as an independent piece of research by decision makers and makes them accountable for the decisions they have made or helps them to make better decisions going forward.

CC agreed that there has been a real push from the third sector to undertake research to measure the impacts of policies etc. Plunkett has re-established its information hub, and when engaging government have created a more credible, representative voice on behalf of their members. CC also agreed with what GB had said about the initial need to set up Rural England and that the work/research has been well received and referenced by others. Impact is what everyone wants to hear about now and that this direction of travel will continue - it has moved from outputs and outcomes. CC would prefer to start with Option 2 as he believes there is still a role for Rural England here and that the work produced and commissioned is different from that which other bodies have done even in this time of increased research capacity.

SE stated that he had first contacted Rural England because he saw the value in it for forging links between academics and practitioners. He agreed with CC, that in the big academic research grants there is a huge emphasis on impact. SE thought Rural England should consider this impact role and perhaps facilitating the impact of other research., which in turn could yield money for the organisation.

AP commented that Rural England should write a brief that encompasses exactly what the Researcher will be doing and does it match up with why Rural England exists. AP thinks the role should be that of a Researcher/advocate, not only talking about the work but how do we get the impact and how do we get the work into the "right corridors", on the right desks etc. once it's published.

GB noted that in regard to third sector research, quite often very little has a rural cut to it. GB believed that by saying that Rural England are not lobbyists this has in fact "hamstrung" ourselves too much. Our position has been "We're going to produce this independent research and then others in the Stakeholder group, including the RSN will make of it what they wish to for their representational work." If the Directors wish to change the focus on this, then it changes the nature of Rural England. With regard to how Whitehall views us, GB was referring to civil servants as he believes that MPs and Lords value and recognise the work of Rural England through the SORS report.

GB can see a role developing for Rural England where the primary focus, in-between the SORS reports, is the impact of government policy – is it achieving what it set out to or not in rural areas. This would culminate every 3-years with the SORS report. There would be reports commissioned by the Research

Panel, reports funded by Calor, and then other work looking at impact for rural areas of various government policy leading up to a culminated report every 2-3 years and creates a new and exciting role for Rural England. If it doesn't work out then in 12 months' time, there is always Option 1 to go back to.

JD thanked SE for his input and that she saw Rural England as an advocacy organisation for rural, holding the government to account on rural proofing. This is a broader role than that of RSN's which is specifically about public sector bodies talking about finance. This is about policy, and can we raise the profile of rural so that it is not an add-on to urban areas and research is part of that and gives a coherent identity.

With regard to recruiting researchers, JD noted that NICRE had a similar issue trying to recruit policy advisors but in the end they did recruit and they were people not known to the organisation previously; so not to close down this option. JD thinks we should produce an outline of the role, particularly if we think of this person as a champion for the interests of rural as well as a Research Director. They should be a Research Director as they will be managing research in-house, looking for funding outside of the organisation and it is at Director level and is effectively Brian's role to date.

CC commented that he thought Rural England's primary role was that of research first and foremost and not to lose that even if the focus changes to create an increased advocacy role. BW agreed that he saw Rural England as an evidence-based advocate.

SE also added that rather than Rural England being commentators, he sees it in the role of maintaining research integrity by broadly monitoring changes in rural areas, and secondly facilitating and supporting research led changes believed to be positive.

DI noted that we must not forget vulnerability and disadvantage as key words, particularly as a lot of our financial support comes through this. SE agreed and would also add increasing the visibility of rural issues which links to rural proofing.

BW thanked everyone for their thoughts and that the preferred option was number 2 although not ruling out Option 1 if Option 2 doesn't work. There may well be researchers that can be approached through the Stakeholder group and their contacts, Universities with rural departments and current researcher contacts.

Action: GB and BW to draft a document on the role that we now envisage for Rural England and a clear idea of what the work/role of the researcher would be going forward. A draft document will be sent to Directors on-line for comment and discussed more fully and signed off at the next Directors' meeting. Looking for someone to start within the next 8 -9 months.

Action: Final document to be presented to Stakeholders at October meeting for their support in changing the vision and an opportunity for them to push out the role to their contacts.

7. Any Other Business

AP was pleased with the detailed response from Lord Callanan but had a query re the estimation that 90% of homes were ready for heat pumps. He asked if BW could seek clarification on where that information/modelling had come from.

Action: BW to contact Lord Callanan's office and request the information for AP.

Next meeting: Mid-September 2021 to be arranged.

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

Meeting closed at 3:30pm