



MEETING OF RURAL ENGLAND CIC
STAKEHOLDER GROUP On-line via Zoom
Thursday 20th January 2022, 11am – 12:30pm
MINUTES

Present:

Graham Biggs (Company Secretary) (GB)
Tracy Baker (NFWI) (TB)
John Birtwistle (First Group) (JB)
Amy Cobbett (National Farmers' Union) (AC)
Margaret Clark CBE (Chair) (MC)
Steve Dowling (Association of Convenience Stores) (SD)
Derek Egan (DEFRA) (DE)
Lizzie Hearn (CPRE) (EH)
Soon-rye Kang (CCRI) (SR)
Sarah Lee (Countryside Alliance) (SL)
Holly Lombardo (National Rural Touring Forum) (HL)
Professor Jeremy Phillipson (NICRE) (JP)
Ian Sherriff (University of Plymouth) (IS)
Professor Mark Shucksmith (University of Newcastle) (MS)
Brian Wilson (RE Director) (BW)

Bethan Aldridge (minute-taker) (BA)

Speakers:

Melanie Thompson-Glen (NICRE) (MTG)
Professor Janet Dwyer (RE Director & CCRI) (JD)

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

1. Apologies for Absence

Daniel Carey-Dawes (CPRE), Trevor Cherrett (Town & Country Planning Association), Dr Steve Emery (RE Director), Polly Gibb (WiRE), Chris Hinchliffe (CPRE), Sarah Hulme (Arthur Rank Centre), David Inman (RE Director), Rev Claire Maxim (Arthur Rank Centre), Jane Mordue (CA – Rural Issues), Sarah Palmer (National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs)

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting 13.10.21 ([See Link](#))

Minutes of the previous meeting 13.10.21 were accepted as a true record.

3. Matters Arising

3) Item 2: Future roles of Chair and Vice Chair

MC re-iterated that she will be standing down at the next AGM in July and that applications for both roles are still open.

Item 6: State of Rural Services 2021 full draft report for comment Action Point

MC asked if the kind offer from Lord Cameron to raise a specific question in the House of Lords had been followed up. BW agreed that although it had not been actioned yet, it would be worth doing.

4. Rural England Research Director Update

BW updated the Group that there have been 2 expressions of interest in the post and they both will be interviewed at the end of January. Both candidates are available from the beginning of the next financial year to take up the role. BW will inform the Group once the outcome is known. MC suggested that the newly appointed Research Director could attend a Stakeholders' meeting to familiarise themselves with the Group.

5. [State of Rural Services 2021 Launch](#) and [Rural Vulnerability Report](#) - review of the launch and any lessons learnt

MC commented that she had been to both the General and the Parliamentary launch events and thought they both went extremely well. The presentations were excellent and overall they were very well attended events.

BW noted that at this stage, there is usually a follow up to the SORS report regarding other research. It has been decided that whilst the recruitment takes place for the Research Director, this be put on hold so that the new person can shape the research once they are in post. Additionally, it would be more difficult for BW to start a project and then hand it over half-way through etc, so it is hoped that discussions will be underway by the next meeting in July.

BW explained that Lord Cameron kindly hosted both launch events. The Parliamentary event was just for the SORS 2021 Launch with a response from Neil Parish MP, Chair of the EFRA Select Committee. The General Launch, again saw the launch of the SORS 21 report, plus a presentation from JD on the Rural Vulnerability report, primarily for utility companies with a Priority Services Register. A response to these presentations was given by the Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP, Chair of the APPG Rural Services.

BW confirmed that feedback has been positive and attendance from both events was good. BW did note that there was reasonable coverage in terms of media in both regional local newspapers and the trade press. It was a difficult day re the national press as this was the day the "party gate" scandal broke and something which cannot be predicted. The SORS 21 Report was sent to Lord Benyon, Minister at Defra, in advance of the event, and then subsequently the report was sent to a number of Ministers at BEIS, the Treasury, DoT, DCMS and DLUHC and also to the Chairs of relevant Select Committees.

Re the Rural Vulnerability Report, BW commented that it was heartening to hear that some of the utility companies at the launch were introducing practical responses to the report and action plans had been written and sent to their regulator etc. Also it was good to note that this report reached a wider audience and that the profile of the Priority Services Register was raised.

JD also wanted to thank DE as Defra was an important partner along with the Utility companies. It was Defra's financial contribution that made a difference to the breadth of the report.

Feedback and comments were discussed from those who had attended the Launches and these included TB who had started discussions with Southern Water re PSRs and will raise this at a public affairs meeting to cascade to members.

GB reflected that many more Parliamentarians attended the event than at previous ones and this may have been because this event was specifically targeted at them. GB added that it would be worth considering for future launches whether or not Parliamentarians are the target audience but to do something beyond a general launch. MC noted that the attendance may have increased also due in part to the event being on-line and this should be considered when organising the next event.

GB and BW also thanked BA for organising both events and although she was unable to attend on the day, the arrangements put in place meant her RSN colleagues were able to run the event without any issues.

6. NICRE Presentations:

a) Resilience toolkit for small rural business (See Presentation)

MTG, Business Development Manager, gave a presentation on behalf of NICRE.

The focus of the presentation was on the on-line resilience toolkit for small rural businesses. There are a large number of small/micro businesses in rural areas, and they tend to have less strong links with other businesses and to run theirs in isolation. Business information is not always available or appropriate, so they tend not to look at their resilience or risk analysis. A [2019 report from the Enterprise Research Centre](#) showed the disconnect for small business between the perceived threats. Many focus on the loss of funding/major customer but they are usually derailed by the "bolt from the blue" e.g. pandemic, cyber-attack etc.

The resilience toolkit is a three-phased holistic approach designed to support the business to develop areas in need of support, be used independently by the business but also with a business advisor/accountant etc. It is due to be published on the NICRE website mid-February 2022.

b) [The State of Rural Enterprise survey findings](#) (See Presentation)

Professor JD, CCRI, gave a presentation on behalf of NICRE.

The focus of this presentation was on the first phase of findings from the State of Rural Enterprise survey and the impact of the pandemic on farm and non-farm businesses. The survey focused on three English regions with 4,000 usable responses.

The sectors covered by the data in the presentation were production, construction, hotel, wholesale, retail, transport, hospitality, business service, and other services, which in fact, is a growing element of rural business. The survey was conducted via telephone with a major focus on management and coping strategies for the pandemic and how things will change moving forward.

Again, similar patterns to MTG's presentation in that businesses saw a mixture of negative and positive impacts from the pandemic. There was rapid and positive adaptation with innovative transformation. Although reports in the press showed staff loyalty to businesses, JD also thought employers showed just as much loyalty to their staff. The survey showed that rural firms were less likely (than urban firms) to lay-off staff permanently. On take-up of government schemes the pattern between rural and urban firms showed very little difference.

JD noted that patterns to seeking advice were similar in urban and rural businesses, but the main difference was in the types of advice and the source of that advice. Rural businesses, more likely to be family run/sole trader, sought advice from family and peer/friend related networks. Urban businesses were more like to use formal sources of advice. Although both rural and urban businesses were talking to their bank managers!

JD agreed with MTG that few rural businesses had formal business plans or risk assessments. Their main strategies were for improving business performance and to control costs. With regard to barriers and challenges, (and as noted in the SORS 21 Report), there is a huge difference in rural infrastructure, and in particular broadband issues as well as transport, poor housing, affordable housing etc.

NICRE will now work further on this unique data set, both in time, breadth and focus so that it can be "mined" for further potential causal factors shaping both the circumstances and the future prospects for rural enterprise. The next stage of the research will be a farms analysis on similar themes.

Discussion/comments were raised for further analysis on: access to banking, rural poverty, employers' loyalty to staff and difficulty in recruiting staff, eligibility for government support schemes and accessibility for rural businesses as may not qualify for support. JB re the transport situation, said it was complex during the pandemic where depending on the type of contract, and who it was with, dictated whether there was financial support to continue the service etc so the data results should be mindful of this. JD to check if the data was only taken for businesses with employees and not sole traders.

DE asked MTG if the anonymised data would be collected and analysed over time to track issues/changes and to help with economic development strategies. MTG said that this wouldn't be happening as the data is anonymised, so there were ethical and practical constraints.

JP noted that NICRE would report back on the farm analysis and that further reports off the back of the data will do a deeper dive into the infrastructure questions (this being led by the Enterprise Research Centre). There will also be some regional profiles initially into the three areas covered in the survey.

Action: There will be an opportunity to feed into the scope of questions and design for future surveys.

Action: JD would like Stakeholders to consider any suggestions of interest for further analysis from the current data set, particularly if undertaking any research where the NICRE data could help.

7. Roundtable session

Rural Services Network: GB reported that the APPG: Rural Health & Care will be launching its [Inquiry report](#) in February 2022.

University of Plymouth – IS reported that the Peninsula Dental School had produced a [Dental Dementia Friendly Guide](#) which had been sent out to all urban and rural dentists.

DEFRA – DE reported that Defra will be updating its statement on rural research priorities and will be in touch with some members of the group. Dr Gary Bosworth and Bob Newbury's study on local drivers of productivity and business performance is aiming to produce a toolkit to enable local authorities to assess their area's economic strengths and weaknesses. This would complement NICRE and CCRI's work. DE noted that they have a revised copy of the Community Led Local Development study which will be published with design principles/lessons learnt etc..

Newcastle University – MS reported that a book is due to be published next year on the detailed findings from the Rural Lives research. Also looking at the Dynamics of Rural Poverty and what's happened since 2010, with a rise in rural poverty, although still lower than urban. How you measure rural poverty i.e. after housing costs or before housing costs, shows some interesting issues. MS is also looking at rural movements across Europe, with Jayne Glass and Jane Astor.

Action: If anyone has any further information they would like to feed in, then please let BA know and she will circulate it.

CA – JM asked if we could send through a link with the minutes to the CA's [findings on Digital Exclusion](#).

NICRE – sent through a link to their [Older Peoples' Shopping report](#).

8. Any Other Business

No other items were brought forward and the meeting closed at 12:25pm.

Date of Next Meetings:

Monday 11.07.22 at 11am – 12:30pm (AGM)

Wednesday 05.10.22 at 11am – 12:30pm (Round table)