



## **MEETING OF THE RURAL ENGLAND CIC SUPPORTERS AND RURAL ENGLAND DIRECTORS**

**On-line via Zoom  
Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> April 2022 11:00am – 12:30pm**

### **MINUTES**

#### **Present:**

Graham Biggs (Company Secretary) (GB)  
Andy Griffiths (Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks, SSE) (AG)  
David Inman (RE Director) (DI)  
Emma Merritt (Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks, SSE) (EM)  
Fay Morris (SP Energy Networks) (FM)  
Kate Robbins (Wessex Water) (KR)  
Elizabeth Warwick (Wales & West Utilities) (EW)  
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 is partly to say thank you to the Supporters for their continued financial support as there would be no Rural England CIC without that, and also to outline what had been done in terms of research. It's also an opportunity for Supporters to feedback what has been happening in their areas of work.

#### **2. Apologies for absence**

Prof Janet Dwyer (RE Director), Tracy Cullen (Western Power Distribution), Jo Giles (Cadent Gas Ltd), Mark Grice (Severn Trent Water), John Houldsworth (John Houldsworth Solicitors), Vanessa Mallinson (Severn Trent Water), Amanda Phillips (United Utilities).

#### **3. Minutes of previous meeting – 26.04.21 (see link)**

[RE Supporters – Minutes 22.04.21](#)

Matters arising from the notes of 30.04.2019 and 26.04.21 regarding an annual dinner with MPs to be discussed under AOB.

#### **4. Rural England work in 2021/22**

**- its supporters, stakeholders and research activity**

BW explained that Rural England CIC's aim is to create evidence to inform better policy making for rural communities and rural economies. It does this mainly through research and analysis to create the rural evidence where there is a perceived gap, and we do this 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 or research from others with Parliamentarians, Local Authorities, and the private sector.

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 Supporters' financial support then there could be no research undertaken.

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

a) **Rural Net Zero Inquiry**

This piece of work was a "think-piece" reviewing current net zero policies and looking into the opportunities and challenges for rural communities and businesses. The report looked at transport challenges, home heating and farming/land management etc.

The report was commissioned and funded predominantly by Calor with support from the National Housing Federation and English Rural Housing Association and was presented at the Vulnerability Day 24<sup>th</sup> June 2021.

b) **Analysis of UK Net Zero Strategy**

Off the back of the Inquiry at a), Rural England did a brief analysis of the Government's UK Net Zero Strategy on behalf of the Rural Services Network.

c) **Rural Vulnerability Project**

This piece of research looked at the experiences of rural, vulnerable utility customers, who were on the Priority Services Register, to identify and understand their issues, drawing out rural-specific lessons. It was funded by the following Utility Supporters: Cadent Gas Ltd, Green Energy, Southern Water, Wales & West Utilities and Western Power Distribution with additional Defra match funding. The work was undertaken in association with colleagues at CCRI at the University of Gloucestershire.

d) **State of Rural Services 2021**

The 2021 report focused on the impact of Covid-19 on service provision and recovery plans for rural areas. The report launch took place in January 2022 with two launches; one Parliamentary and the other a General one and both were held on-line.

The Report found that some services were definitely winners ie online access to services, cashless payments, and indeed local, rural food shops. Some village stores did well during periods of lockdown when people weren't traveling. There was innovation within the sector with stores supporting vulnerable customers and doing home deliveries etc.

Those sectors that did not do well were cultural, cafes and rural pubs - all heavily reliant

on customers outside of local areas. A number of closures have occurred. The Report also highlighted the importance of digital issues where rural areas struggled with digital access. But also it highlighted community resilience eg community volunteering. Overall, the picture is mixed.

Both launches were well attended with plenty of discussion around the SORS 21 report plus the Rural Vulnerability Project report and awareness raising of the Priority Services Register (PSR).

BW explained that he had also presented at the World Health Organisation in a seminar on rural proofing looking at health policies etc. BW also participated in a DEFRA workshop on their 25-year environmental plan.

GB updated the meeting on the Rural Proofing for Health Toolkit that was launched last year and hoped to see it developed a bit further this year. Because of the pandemic and changes to systems in health, this hasn't happened but hopefully will do soon. Northern Ireland has recently expressed an interest in developing the toolkit and wanting permission to utilise the English version as their template.

DI wished to record his thanks to BW for his work on the SORS 21 Report.

## **5. Planned Research Activity in 2022/23**

### **Priorities and Next Steps**

#### **a) Village / Community Agent schemes**

This is a follow-up report from the Rural Vulnerability project that will focus on village/community agent schemes in the voluntary sector and their potential to work with the utility network operators on things like PSR promotion and signposting or even signing up people.

#### **b) SORS follow up project**

There were four options to look into topics in more depth than in the main SORS 21 report. These will be discussed with the Rural England Stakeholder Group.

#### **c) Follow-up work on the [Rural Proofing for Health Toolkit](#)**

Added to the list by GB (see above).

#### **d) Potential further project with Utility Network Operators**

To start upon completion of the Village/Community Agents scheme work.

#### **e) National Rural Touring Forum**

Keen to do research on the health and wellbeing benefits from arts schemes, which are touring in rural areas ie shows in village halls etc. This is a big agenda for the arts sector currently.

EM commented that SSEN would be interested in the results of the Village/Community Agent schemes report as her organisation has noticed a slow-down in sign-ups for the PSR recently.

SSEN has made a commitment in its Business Plan 2023 to increase the number of customers on the PSR and the services provided to them. FM also asked if SP Energy Networks could be involved in this work as it sits under her Social Obligations Team.

BW noted that he would need to check with those Network Providers who had financially committed for this project for their permission to share the results. EW, one of the funders, said she couldn't see a problem with sharing the information as it will be a project that will benefit everyone plus providers are working in different geographical areas and different industries. GB commented that although the project is geographically specific to areas served by the project funders, there will be general experiences/messages that come out of this that can be shared and of use to a wider audience.

#### **6. New Research Director appointment**

GB informed the Group that BW is standing down as the Research Director, whilst staying on as a Director of Rural England. A new Research Director has been appointed – Professor Martin Phillips from Leicester University will be joining the team. He will be helping to scope the 2022/23 programme once he is in post, hopefully from May/June 2022.

**Action:** GB to email everyone when Martin is definitely in post.

#### **7. Roundtable session - Supporters to provide a brief update on research/developments and any rural service delivery messages arising from the wider context, such as the pandemic, economic recovery, cost of living and the war in Ukraine.**

**Also given the recent storms and the impact on rural communities (prolonged power cuts, engagement/work being carried out after etc) what issues have Supporters identified, actions taken and any opportunities for collaborations/shared learning?**

**Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks** – EM explained that the SSEN area had been hit by seven storms in both licensed areas. The Network started to look at partnership and resilience strategy with areas of high consumer vulnerability. They brought a resilience charity on board and are working with local resilience forums. Would like to share any learning with others.

**Wales & West Utilities** – EW noted that the storms weren't so much of an issue as the gas pipes are underground. The impact was on the electricity networks. EW's organisation does annual trend surveys and what has changed for customers and what extra support is required. They are looking at rurality as one of the area types and what makes someone more vulnerable. OFGEM has brought in a carbon monoxide allowance so the gas networks are now looking at this issue. That allowance is used to bring onboard partners to support customers. EW thinks that this type of allowance will also be brought into electricity networks to help vulnerable customers.

**SP Energy Networks** – FM raised similar concerns to EM with the number of storms hitting the DNO area. Her organisation is concluding resilience plans after each storm. If there is any shared learning, FM will be happy to do so, to the extent allowed. EM is happy to share any reports too.

GB noted that Rural Services Network (RSN) members are also concerned about the resilience

of the electricity network as a result of the storms. A number of RSN members are calling for the approach to the transition to net zero in off-gas grid areas to be balanced across the sustainability of the electricity network in adverse weather conditions.

EM commented that Dorset was their worst hit area, rather than the modelling they'd done previously which had shown it would be rural Oxfordshire.

GB commented that Rural Services Network had just appointed economic consultants to look at the cost-of-living crisis from a rural perspective.

**Action:** GB to make the cost-of-living report available to the Supporter's Group once it is signed off.

**Action:** A specific rural bulletin will be written, and the cost of living will be integral to this. GB will contact energy providers for information on who customers can contact for help etc.

FM commented that she would like to include her Social Obligations Team into these meetings.

## **8. Any Other Business**

**Annual Dinner:** GB noted that in 2019 and 2020, there were discussions about organising an annual dinner with MPs to get across the rural points directly to them. The budget would be about £15-£17K to be paid for by Supporters' directly. It was suggested last year to do this virtually and with hampers. It needs a strong agenda to attract MPs and Rural England CIC haven't taken this forward as MPs are working on so many other issues. It was agreed that the timing is not right now for such an event, but it is definitely something to consider in the future.

**Action:** To be put on agenda for next year to review.

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