

MEETING OF RURAL ENGLAND CIC
STAKEHOLDER GROUP AGM On-line via Zoom
Monday 11th July 2022, 11am – 12:30pm
MINUTES

Present:

Graham Biggs (Company Secretary) (GB)
John Birtwistle (First Group) (JB)
Margaret Clark CBE (Chair) (MC)
Professor Janet Dwyer OBE (RE Director & CCRI) (JD)
Derek Egan (DEFRA) (DE)
Tim Jones (Heart of the South West LEP) (TJ)
Jane Mordue (CA – Rural Issues) (JM)
Professor Martin Phillips (RE Research Director & University of Leicester) (MP)
Professor Jeremy Phillipson (NICRE) (JP)
Richard Quallington (ACRE) (RQ)
Professor Mark Shucksmith (University of Newcastle) (MS)
Brian Wilson (RE Director) (BW)

Bethan Aldridge (minute-taker) (BA)

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and offered her congratulations, on behalf of the Stakeholder Group, to JD on her recent OBE for services to rural research.

1. Apologies for Absence

Lord Ewen Cameron, Trevor Cherrett (Town & Country Planning Association), Polly Gibb (WiRE), David Inman (RE Director), Holly Lombardo (National Rural Touring Forum), Alison Mclean, Sarah Palmer (National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs), David Pink (Arthur Rank Centre), Avril Roberts (CLA)

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting 20.01.22 ([See Link to Attachment 1](#))

Minutes of the previous meeting 20.01.22 were accepted as a true record.

3. Matters Arising

7) Roundtable session (DEFRA)

MC noted that DE had stated that DEFRA would be updating its statement on rural research priorities and assumed that, given the political situation, this may not be happening. DE confirmed that it has been delayed but DEFRA are still hoping to publish the statement (end-July/early August), shortly after the publication of the Annual Rural

Proofing Report (possibly mid-July).

4. Election of Chair and Vice-Chair (Description of Roles -see Attachment 2)

GB noted that both MC and RQ had indicated a willingness to continue for the current year only and invited nominations for the posts of Chair and Vice-Chair.

JD nominated MC as Chair which was seconded by RQ. MC proposed RQ as Vice-Chair which was seconded by JD. The group was asked for any other nominations – there were none and so both MC and RQ were re-elected without opposition.

MC stressed that this really is her final year as Chair and that if during the year anyone wishes to step into the role, she will stand down. RQ confirmed that this is his final year as well.

5. Introduction of Professor Martin Phillips - new Research Director

BW introduced MP to the Stakeholder Group. MP's role will be to lead on main projects eg State of Rural Services Reports or others in intervening years, and also to oversee any projects that are put out to Rural England CIC Associates.

MC thanked BW for his work to-date and is very pleased that he will continue in his role as a RE Director.

6. RE Budget with actual to end of June 2022 (GB) (See Attachment 3)

GB explained that the budgets are now in a new format which is easier to read and understand. He also explained that in Line 42 there appears to be an overspend but it is income derived within the financial year and received from the Utility Research Panel in previous years and not spent, and then carried forward. The estimated balance carry forward is £18K in current format.

TJ asked whether IT support and provision for cyber security/resilience had been considered. GB thought that it wasn't a budget issue but rather a Business Plan or Risk Register issue and an identified risk (see item 8 below). The Rural Services Network (RSN) operates and manages the website, and its data protection policies are mirrored by those of Rural England CIC.

JP asked about the main income sources for Rural England CIC. GB explained that the core support line is £7K from First Group, £5K from Calor Ltd plus a further £6K to spend on research. There is further income from the Supporters' Group and there are 3 levels of membership. Over the past three years, a small group of four Supporters (Rural Vulnerability Panel) have each paid £5K pa for extended research work. This is now in its final year and GB will be asking those involved if they wish to continue.

7. Consideration of main research project for 2022/23 (See Attachment 4)

BW commented that it was time to confirm the main research project for 2022/23. This had been delayed whilst MP's recruitment took place. The Directors have identified four topics and looking at practicalities of actually finding a workable research method with a limited budget. So, on balance the Directors are favouring the high streets topic, where the RSN has a Rural Market Towns Group which could be a valuable data source. The Directors are interested in the migration topic and a sub-group has formed to think about how this topic could be taken forward via a joint Universities route.

MP confirmed that the thinking was that the high street topic very much fitted into the Levelling Up policy agenda. Over the summer, BW and MP would put together a detailed brief on the chosen project.

MC added in her thoughts about scoping for the High Street project to include questions about taxation, incentives/disincentives, business rates etc. She also asked if there could be a mix of bid towns and those that have already received grant funding.

TJ offered his support for the Task and Finish Group, and also support for the High Street project. He could see permitted development rights as an interesting area, and also integrated local supply chain development, net zero, embedding social fabric into high streets, and particular issues with coastal rural high streets.

MS queried the focus of the High Street project and whether this was on retail or had a broader scope. If the scope is broader, then he noted that it was important to define that and that there are current initiatives of rural town regeneration eg the [Borderlands Project](#). MS also thought that the cost-of-living project was currently very high on the political agenda so leaving it might make it less timely and this could look at the methodology used by the CRC and others – the [Loughborough University Minimum Income Standard methodology](#) (team used calculates the Real Living Wage) which shows the cost of living for different types of households in different types of rural areas and in a systematic way shows the changes against a known baseline. The [Joseph Rowntree Foundation project](#) looked at the differences between urban and rural. On the migration project, MS wondered if it is an actual issue or something estate agents have talked up. He queried whether the Census results would be more important for that, and the timing of data releases may affect the project etc.

JM agreed with the high streets project and agreed with MS that it is not just about retail but rethinking what will bring people in to town and what do they do when they are there – a good case study would be Buckingham. Citizens Advice have been calculating and assessing rural poverty and have real-time data that they can offer anyone who takes on the cost-of-living project.

RQ and JP both thought the proposals were definable and deliverable. RQ flagged up that ACRE was picking up from its members the cost of living and its implications in relation to heating fuel etc. RQ keen to support a collaborative approach on this topic and the migration proposal. JP noted that NICRE could contribute to the migration proposal. Also, NICRE has £100K available and will be putting out an “open-call” for projects soon after the summer. Changing work and business patterns post Covid is likely to be a theme. Projects up to £15K are eligible to apply. NICRE is also planning its next large scale Business Survey and would like Rural England CIC to help shape this.

GB informed that Group that the Rural Services Network has instructed Kovia Consulting s to take a high level look at the cost of living crisis and at the main drivers of difference between rural and urban areas. It would make sense for Rural England to take a view on that report and reflect on the methodology MS has referred to.

JD noted that CCRI has a panel of people willing to engage in future research and that could feed into a proposal to NICRE and/or collaborative work on the cost of living issue.

DE too offered access to various data sets that would be useful . Also, Gary Bosworth is doing work for DEFRA on migration to rural areas to contribute to the enhancement of the business eco-system, so there may already be areas of interest explored . MS [attended a recent conference](#) where there were a number of international papers studying this issue.

MC summarised the discussion points and thanked everyone for their helpful offers. She confirmed that there were very positive responses to the high street project, a desire to do something more on the cost of living but with timings flagged as an issue. Migration and home working was also well received, and she wondered if it was worth considering this with the rural housing sector as a potential source of funding. There had been no discussion on the pub proposal but MC noted that there is another wave of pub closures from those who survived Covid but have then had to close since and also, the broader rural hospitality sector that has diversified in order to survive. It may be that these are picked up in the next SORS report.

MP and BW thanked everyone for their constructive comments, offers of help and interesting leads.

Action: MC asked if consideration could be made for a topic specific discussion once the Directors have met again, particularly on the migration/home working project.

Action: BW asked that if anyone was interested in joining a Task and Finish group to let him know. The work is not onerous, but it's good to have a small group of people to contact at key points in the project.

8. Business Plan (See Attachment 5)

Business Plans cover a three-year period and are reviewed by Directors once a year. In answer to TJ's question about digital security, GB will review this and add it into Objective 6.or to the Risk Register as appropriate.

9. On-going and Pipeline Projects (See Attachment 6)

BW updated the Group on the various projects:

Scope for Village/Community Agent Schemes to Support Utility PSR Sign-up: funded by a grouping of four utility providers. The project is two-thirds complete and a draft report is due end of July.

Impact of Rural Touring Arts on Loneliness, Isolation and Wellbeing: still waiting to hear if the funding bid succeeded.

Follow Up to Rural Vulnerability Research project: Once the Community Agent Scheme project is complete there will be another project in the series for utility providers.

GB also noted that he has been in conversation with Calor Ltd to use their funding to look at the social impacts of the current proposals for decarbonisation of off-grid gas properties. Integral to that will be a number of quite detailed case studies looking at that impact in different types of properties, in different areas and where the occupants are from a range of age groups etc. Further details to follow.

10. Roundtable session

NICRE – JD reported they have been doing work, funded by the South West LEPS, looking at building an algorithm to estimate the impact of the withdrawal of farm support payments at local authority level across the country. LA's can look at both the economic losses arising from the withdrawal of the scheme to farms and also estimate the extent to which agri-environmental scheme funding is already going into their local area. It will provide the granularity of the impact of this big change in farm policy.

Also, following on from the State of Rural Enterprise 2021 Report, NICRE has brought out another report specifically focused on some of the infrastructure issues that were seen as a particular challenge for businesses in rural areas. NICRE is also developing an innovation I portal to showcase best rural innovation in rural enterprise. It will allow people to share what they've been involved with to avoid people duplicating projects/topics etc.

JP would like MP, JD and himself to get together to feed into the development of the Rural Enterprise Survey and also look at the next set of open-call projects.

Heart of the South West LEP – TJ reported that he's been working on the fragmented nature of agri-business support mechanisms, the [North Devon Biosphere](#) – an environmental project covering the catchment areas of the Rivers Tor and Torridge. Looking to establish a commercial market place for trading in natural capital resources and these are currently carbon sequestration and Nutrient Trading.

CA – JM reported that CA recently completed a report on [Rural Poverty](#) in January and then updated it in April. A trend is people "giving up"/opting out who will then become a cost on society because they'll have to be housed etc. CA are also looking at rural incomes and how the cost of living in rural areas is much higher than in urban areas.

DEFRA – DE reported that Defra has a new Rural Affairs Deputy Director, Lee Davies, who is a social researcher and interested in maintaining and developing a Rural Research Programme and supporting other researchers. DEFRA is looking to refresh the Rural Academic Panel with JD and JP and others and to obtain more shorter-term projects that can be turned around quickly and contribute in real-time.

Newcastle University – MS reported that his book is due to be published next January, entitled Rural Poverty Today: Experiences of Social Exclusion in Rural Britain. MS has also done a [blog](#) on the CRE website on the cost of living crisis and rural poverty. He's also working on a paper looking at the impact of Covid on rural poverty, responses, support etc and looking at being more resilient etc. MS has a PhD student starting who will be researching rural pubs for three years, linked to the Plunkett Foundation, who would be someone to liaise with if the rural pubs project goes ahead.

ACRE – RQ reported that they are working with Utility Aid to look at challenges that village halls and rural community buildings are facing in terms of cost, energy, improvements etc. There are also looking at a bi-annual membership survey and researching delivery of eligible services at a national level, adopting a model that is more cost-effective and covers the whole of rural England.

First Buses: JB updated the group on Bus Service Improvement Plans – the DfT is now expecting to make money available to those authorities who were granted funding – ie 31 but unfortunately very few are rural. The first money will be released in August with no other monies available for other areas.

11. Any Other Business

JD wanted to note that the article by RSN on “if rural was a region” was excellent and encapsulated a lot of the thoughts so many have.

GB was aware that Pragmatix, who are the authors of the report JD referred to, are in discussion with some of the coastal community organisations about producing something specific around coastal towns.

Meeting closed at 12:25pm.

Date of Next Meeting:

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