



MEETING OF THE RURAL ENGLAND CIC SUPPORTERS AND RURAL ENGLAND DIRECTORS

On-line via Zoom
Thursday 20th April 2023 2:30pm – 4pm

MINUTES

Present:

Graham Biggs (Chair of Directors & Company Secretary) (GB)
David Inman (RE Director) (DI)
Beth Kennedy (Anglian Water) (BK)
Emma Merritt (Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks, SSE) (EM)
Fay Morris (SP Energy Networks) (FM)
Professor Martin Phillips (Research Director & RE Director) (MP)
Laura Pugh (Severn Trent Water) (LP)
Sophie Shorney (Wales & West Utilities Ltd) (SS)
Brian Wilson (RE Director) (BW)

1. Welcome and introduction

GB welcomed everyone to the annual meeting and explained that he became the Chair of Directors in January, and that BW has stepped down from this role but continues to be a Director. Between them they will feedback on Rural England's work for 2022/23.

BW has also stepped down from his role as the Principal Researcher and this is now undertaken by MP, the newly appointed Research Director. GB introduced MP and also explained that the annual meeting is partly to say thank you to the Supporters for their continued financial support without which no research could be undertaken. It was also an opportunity to outline what has been done in terms of research and for Supporters to feedback and comment on these areas of work.

2. Apologies for absence

Bethan Aldridge (minute-taker), Mark Grice (Severn Trent Water), Vanessa Mallinson (Severn Trent Water), Elizabeth Warwick (Wales & West Utilities)

3. Minutes of previous meeting – 26.04.22 (see link)

[RE Supporters – Minutes 26.04.22](#)

The Minutes were accepted and there were no matters arising.

4. Rural England work in 2022/23

- its supporters, stakeholders, and research activity

BW worked through a PowerPoint presentation based on current and planned research

activity. Please see attached presentation.

a) **Village Agent/Community Agent schemes research project (See Attached Report)**

Along with colleagues at the University of Gloucestershire, Rural England has previously undertaken research to see if people living in smaller, rural settlements were more impacted by gas, electricity, and water outages/disruption to supply etc. A key finding from the first project suggested that a lot of people were unaware of the Priority Services Register (PSR), who was eligible to be on that register and the benefits of being on it.

As a follow-on to that project, the next research focused on village/community agent schemes. 14 were identified in the areas supplied by the funders and varied in terms of budget, geographical area covered, and some have merged into social prescribing (NHS funded). Most were aware of the PSR. Less than half actively promoted it but there was a realisation that it was a missed opportunity and a willingness to link up with their local utility providers.

The four main funders of the research, Cadent Gas, National Grid, Wales and West Utilities and Southern Water are very happy for their research to be shared with other utility companies.

GB asked if any other Supporters would like to join the Research Group as they would be most welcome. There is an additional membership payment for the Group to allow the research work undertaken to be a “deeper dive” etc.

Action: BK to email BW to follow up on contact with schemes in her area.

Action: Copy of the research to be distributed.

Action: GB to provide utility companies with information about the Research Group, how it's formed, cost parameters etc.

b) **Priority Services Register specific groups research project**

Again, a follow-up project with the University of Gloucestershire looking at specific PSR codes i.e.: Mental ill health and Dementia, Medical equipment dependency, and Blind and partially sighted.

This project has just started and rather than a large number of interviews, the aim is to have a smaller group interviewed but in much greater depth and drawing out rural specific issues. Hope to share the results once the project is completed and signed off.

c) **Rural town centres research project (to be discussed with MP)**

MP discussed the major project started in 2022/23 and which is still on-going. **(See attached presentation – to follow.)**

The focus looks at the sort of the challenges that small towns might be facing partly as a result of the impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic, but also the broader changes in the economy and in sort of government support for local governments.

There are two phases to the project. The first phase uses existing data on the state of small

towns e.g. Census, demographic and socio-economic data which is followed up by case studies and involves interviews with local government officials etc and people in identified settlements.

MP reported that he has been updating the 2011 analysis to include the 2021 Census data. Investigations of the results have showed a change in the definition of built-up areas, but this has subsequently been removed with more comparison work. Some of these small towns with higher levels of deprivation were former mining and coastal resort towns, there were some settlements with quite significant levels of deprivation.

MP is now looking at a questionnaire for local Economic Development Officers to draw on local expertise in these settlement, local policy responses to recent/current national policy initiatives etc.

The second phase of the project will be interview in the case study locations. MP hopes this will take place from the end of May/beginning of June.

d) Decarbonisation impacts for off-grid properties research project

GB noted that this project is on-going and looking at decarbonisation of off-grid, rural properties. A range of residential and commercial properties are being looked at. It's a difficult group looking at how to heat older properties, those on oil, LPG etc and government net zero policies and replacement boilers etc.

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

BW also wanted to follow up on the Health Toolkit that was developed a couple of years ago. There have been a couple of developments:

i) Work going on between voluntary sector organisations (ACRE) and various health providers in five counties i.e., Devon, Gloucestershire, Shropshire, Northampton, and Lincolnshire

ii) The toolkit has been adapted for use in Northern Ireland and was launched at Stormont in Autumn 2022.

5. Planned Research Activity in 2023/24

Priorities and Next Steps

GB informed the meeting that there are currently no confirmed projects as yet for 2023/24. GB was meeting with Calor shortly, who funded the decarbonisation of rural properties report, and it may be as a result of signing off on that report that another project is agreed.

GB explained that in most years, we have a major project, and for 2022/23 this is the Towns Centre one but currently no confirmation of one for 2023/24 mainly because there may be other projects off the back of the Towns Centre one when it is finalised and signed off.

GB expects a decision to be made in September on the new projects, which would then realistically span the end of 2023/24 and into 2024/25. Also, by then there will be another project on behalf of the Utility Research Group which is yet to be decided.

GB confirmed that the new State of Rural Services report will be launched by early 2025. The work on this report would need to start in late 2023/24 and hope that this could influence the policy agenda of any new Government. GB would hope to hold a virtual Parliamentary Vulnerability Day in 2023/24 once the two projects discussed above have been signed off. All Rural England CIC Supporters would be invited to these events.

6. Roundtable session - Supporters to provide a brief update on research/developments and any rural service delivery messages arising from the wider context, e.g., cost of living and the war in Ukraine.

Rural Services Network – Cost of Living Household Survey. Work was undertaken with members and the Rural Issues Group of Citizens Advice. RSN were overwhelmed with the nearly 7,000 responses to the survey. The report is in the process of being finalised and will be published shortly. (See Addendum)

Anglian Water – BK noted that their customers have been affected by the Cost of Living. Anglian Water has been working with the Local Authorities in their area to distribute household support funding directly to customers who were experiencing financial hardship. A knock-on effect from this has been to help customers partially, or completely, clear arrears and support their future payments but also to make them aware of their eligibility for other funding schemes. It has been very well received and to date has helped 8,000 customers receive over £2million of government funding.

Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks – EM explained that SSEN has been working closely with water companies on data sharing agreements and updating the Priority Services Register. Also, been working closely with resilience partners and looking at how to go above and beyond their requirements as part of the Civil Contingencies Act. Alongside other DNO's, SSEN has been looking at new obligations around price control and targets for supporting vulnerable customers plus any research gaps.

Wales & West Utilities – SS is the VCMA Manager, she has a carbon monoxide allowance to bring onboard partners to support vulnerable customers e.g. Citizens Advice, Care & Repair, Age UK. They are also working in collaboration with other gas DNOs. They are also helping vulnerable customers to access the right tariffs and checking for unclaimed benefits, making them aware of the PSR, carbon monoxide awareness etc. In terms of research, Wales & West undertake lots of stakeholder engagement and targeting hard-to-reach groups and in the process of doing the GD3 planning

Severn Trent Water – LP informed the group that currently they are receiving a high volume of applications for the social tariff schemes which are in place to help customers who are struggling to pay their bills. They are monitoring this and potentially looking to expand the criteria for support. LP confirmed that they too, like EM, are expanding their data sharing partners to receive more information, to help customers during incidents and supply issues, to get them on the PSR and help more customers. LP keen to keep working with Rural England CIC to help with initial contacts and reaching vulnerable, rural customers.

GB noted that there may be data sets/research that Rural England CIC could help provide and encouraged those at the meeting to just ask and not wait for the Annual meeting.

7. Any Other Business

GB thanked everyone for taking part in today's meeting and for sharing feedback. He also thanked everyone for their continued support and to reiterate that it is this support that enables Rural England CIC to do its work.

Meeting closed at 3:50pm

Addendum:

Cost of Living Survey findings and Press Release

As discussed in this meeting, the press release and Cost of Living Survey findings were published in the RSN's Rural Bulletin in May. Please find a link below to them:

<https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/rural-households-left-feeling-isolated-by-the-cost-of-living-crisis>

Graham, on behalf of the RSN, wished to thank all who helped get the survey out.