

MEETING OF RURAL ENGLAND CIC
STAKEHOLDER GROUP AGM On-line via Zoom
Wednesday 23rd July 2025, 11am – 1pm

MINUTES

Present:

Graham Biggs (Chair of Directors and Company Secretary) (GB)
Margaret Clark CBE (MC)
Derek Egan (DEFRA) (DE)
Sarah Palmer (National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs) (SP)
Professor Martin Phillips (RE Research Director & University of Leicester) (MP)
Professor Jeremy Phillipson (NICRE) (JP)
Professor Mark Shucksmith (MS)
Brian Wilson (RE Director) (BW)
Tim Jones (LEPs) (TJ)
Chrissie Booth (NFWI) (CB)
Professor Matthew Reed (CCRI) (MR)
Dr Natasha Stonebridge (CCRI) (Presenter) (NS)

The Chair for this meeting, GB, welcomed everyone to the meeting.

1. Apologies for Absence

Lord Ewen Cameron, Professor Janet Dwyer OBE, Polly Gibb, David Inman, Professor Michael Winter OBE, Mark Thomas, Brad Taylor, and Duncan Carter

2. Minutes of Previous Meeting 08.07.24 ([See Link to Attachment 1](#))

Minutes of the previous meeting 08.07.24 were accepted as a true record.

There were no matters arising.

3. Election of Chair and Vice Chair

GB noted that there had not been any nominations and asked all those present if anyone wished to put themselves forward. There were no nominations and as previously agreed by the Directors, they will take turns attending the Stakeholder meetings to act in the role of Chair.

GB requested that if anyone would like to find out more about these roles, then they should contact him directly.

Action: To keep this as a regular Agenda item until the roles are filled.

4. RE Budget with actual to 30th June 2025 (GB) ([See Link to Attachment 2](#))

GB presented the budget report for 2025/26 with Actual Income and Expenditure to 30th June 2025. He reported that there were no issues he wished to bring to the attention of Stakeholders.

The group noted an estimated carry-forward balance of £43,000 into 2026/27 and that some £50,000 of the current year's estimated spending came from previous year's funds. MC inquired about Rural England's long-term financial outlook, to which GB responded with some confidence despite losing core funding from First Group. He explained Directors had conducted a major review of income and expenditure on the loss of the First Group funding and that was reflected in the budget report. That said, GB noted that membership income was always difficult to predict – especially in difficult financial time such as those currently being experienced across the county. GB referenced an estimated surplus of circa £20,000 that provides a bit of a buffer against potential withdrawals.

5. Roundtable session

DEFRA:

DE shared plans for a large-scale university-based research program focused on rural proofing activities, pending funding approval by October.

NFYFC

SP mentioned the completion of a rural youth membership survey and social return on investment study, which she will share with GB for distribution once approved by the Board of Management. GB said that the opportunity existed for a presentation to the next meeting of this Group in respect of this research.

NICRE

JP discussed the evolution of the NICRE partnership, highlighting Newcastle University's strategic injection to fund the coordinating team for the next five years. He mentioned the partnership's support for Defra's Rural Task Force, including the development of evidence statements for missions.

JP also reference a Toolkit for Climate Change Issues which has been developed and that a Digital Inclusion project was running in the North East. GB referenced the agreement between NICRE and Rural England to meet periodically to explore collaboration opportunities. MR congratulated Newcastle on their commitment to NICRE

CCRI

MR reference a UKRI -funded local policy innovation partnership in Wales, which aims to learn from NICRE's model.

MARK SHUCKSMITH:

MS shared updates on his recent academic work. He has published a new book on re-thinking rural studies which he said would be of most interest to academics/researchers. He was working with a Scottish Rural College led project reviewing and evaluating community led development in Scotland. He has submitted a paper to a journal “can mission-led government work for rural areas.”

Rural Funding and Development Challenges

The group discussed generally the devolution proposals for government and local government, noting that rural areas, for instance the South- West Peninsula, are not covered by mayoral deals and are at risk of being left behind. They highlighted the need for specific funds for rural areas and the importance of continuing to lobby for their inclusion in funding opportunities.

TJ mentioned the Great South- West initiative as a pan-regional partnership focused on food security and the rural agenda.

6. Update on On-going and Pipeline Projects

(a) SORS 2025 Research Report ([See Link to Attachment 5](#))

The final State of the Rural Services Report (SORS) had been circulated via a link together with a draft Media/Dissemination Pack.

The Report would be ‘published’ in August. Stakeholders would be sent the Report and Press Release etc. and were encouraged to promote it within their own networks.

The meeting focused on the detailed report presented by MP, which highlighted the sparse distribution of essential services, such as healthcare facilities, pharmacies, and defibrillators, in rural areas. MC and GB referred to the implications of this report, particularly in relation to government policies like the 10-Year Plan for Health, questioning the effectiveness of these policies in addressing service gaps in rural areas.

The report examined rural service provision across several sectors, finding that while rural convenience stores have remained stable, supermarkets are concentrated in urban areas, leading to limited competition and potential cost implications for food pricing. The analysis highlighted declining access to cash due to bank branch closures, with cash usage now accounting for only 12% of UK payments. Also identified were significant challenges in rural education, including school closures and long travel distances to further education institutions.

The report also addressed healthcare access issues, noting that 50% of rural postcodes lack health services within their area, and highlighted ongoing digital divides in broadband and mobile infrastructure, while suggesting that community transport could help address service

accessibility concerns.

DE inquired about using the data to measure access to basic services in rural communities, and MP confirmed the feasibility of such an analysis using geolocated data. MR emphasised the importance of capturing the composite “thinness of state services” experienced by rural communities and suggested developing a metric to reflect this. The discussion concluded with an interest in further exploring these data-driven insights through a potential future research project.

The group further discussed analysing rural data using Defra's typology, which considers settlement size and accessibility, noting that such analysis could reveal patterns obscured by general rural categorisation. They discussed the potential for examining community organisations' roles in service provision, acknowledging challenges like privacy concerns and volunteer recruitment. MC suggested revisiting previous service indicator studies, while BW highlighted volunteer retention issues post-COVID and the volatility of short-term funding for community services.

GB encouraged colleagues to propose to him innovative, low-cost research ideas, as Rural England was not currently undertaking new research except for the pipeline project for the Utility Companies Research Panel.

(b) The Challenges for Rural Electrification Draft Report

The draft report from the CCRI had been circulated via a link. It was stressed that this was a draft and therefore was confidential at this time.

NS presented findings from the research project, which combined qualitative interviews with sector experts and rural community members in Gloucestershire. The study identified five key themes:

- a complex and disparate landscape of conflicting priorities and guidance,
- hidden retrofit costs that exceed available grant funding,
- lack of trust in technology and installation due to negative experiences
- capacity and supply constraints in the national grid,
- a boom-and-bust cycle in training and technology adoption.

The research highlighted challenges in engaging middle-income households not eligible for grants and suggested a need for mixed technology approaches rather than focusing on single solutions.

NS presented findings from the engagement with the experts highlighting key barriers such as

upfront and running costs, unfamiliarity with technology, and lack of local expertise. She emphasised the need for a mindset shift towards understanding rural communities' unique needs and cultural identities. The report suggested interventions like myth-busting, developing community-led solutions, and introducing zero-energy efficient loans to encourage adoption. An authentic intermediary, possibly a trusted community member, was identified as crucial for bridging the gap between technology providers and rural homeowners.

NS also shared insights from a community group discussion about solar panels, highlighting how a member's negative initial experience led to a positive outcome due to cost savings, despite the disruption.

The group explored the potential for community funding and energy sharing, emphasising the importance of trust and learning together. MR and JP discussed the project's engagement with expert groups and the need for trusted intermediaries, suggesting examples from Wales and Northumberland as potential models for future interventions.

The discussion focused on community energy projects and the challenges of transitioning to net-zero in rural areas. MR and NS shared insights from their research, highlighting the importance of building trust and having authentic conversations with communities. They noted that while some community members were enthusiastic about renewable technologies, others expressed skepticism or practical concerns, such as retaining the use of wood-burning stoves. SP emphasized the value of in-person discussions and advice for helping communities navigate the transition. The group also discussed the need for more data on the uptake of renewable technologies in rural versus urban areas.

The group discussed the phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance, where people believe others are less enthusiastic about climate action when polling suggests widespread support. They explored the effectiveness of local community open days to demonstrate renewable energy technologies, with BW sharing examples from his area.

GB outlined the next steps for the project. A revised report is to be finalised by mid-August for launch in September. Stakeholders would be sent a copy of the final report plus a media/engagement pack.

(c) Pipeline Project: Energy and Water Use in Today's Countryside

GB reported that a questionnaire on energy and water use in the countryside was to be distributed widely - starting next week and closing at the end of September.

7. Any Other Business

GB reminded the Group of the upcoming October meeting involving rural policy and research practitioners from all four home nations, where there would be presentations on the SORS report and the finalised electrification report.