

LGA Special Interest Group Annual Report to LGA Board (19/20)

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Membership

The RSN has 2 main subsidiary SIG's. **Sparse-Rural** which has 104 members which deals with our financial representational (distributional) work and the **Rural Assembly** (with 121 Members, including the SPARSE members) which deals with all the non-financial distribution issues and rural policy generally. These both meet twice a year when all members are entitled to be represented. All Sparse-Rural members are additionally members of the recently created Rural Health & Care Alliance – a Partnership between the RSN and the National Centre for Rural Health and Care.

The other LGA recognised sub - group includes the **Rural Fire and Rescue Services Group** which meets after the LGA Annual Fire Conference has 10 members. It seeks to present arguments common to County and Combined Services operating in areas that have significant rural areas.

The Rural Services Network is however much more widespread than these Special Interest Groups and further information can be found at <http://www.rsonline.org.uk/page/how-we-work>.

Our Aim

Our main aim is to act as the national champion for rural services, ensuring that people in rural areas have a strong voice. We are fighting for a fair deal for rural communities to maintain their social and economic viability for the benefit of the nation. Our work focuses on four priorities, and we also recognise Rural Vulnerability as a cross cutting issue.

- Public Sector Funding
- Barriers to Access
- Future of Rural Areas
- Health and Wellbeing

For Sparse Rural our main priority is the funding formula and working to ensure that rural areas receive fair funding to enable them to deliver their services, considering the additional costs of service delivery in rural areas.

For the Rural Assembly, our main priority will be to seek to influence Government and policy makers across a whole range of issues facing rural service providers and communities in line with the four priorities set out above.

Key Activities / Outcomes of work undertaken

The major outcome from our work this year was the continuation of Rural Services Delivery Grant to £81 million, an increase of £16million more than was originally planned in early 2019 which was £65Million.

We recognise however that this is a temporary solution and more importantly have been working hard to gather evidence for rural authorities to support the Fairer Funding Review which has been deferred but with work of course continuing to take place. We have a representative that sits on key technical working groups alongside MHCLG putting across the rural perspective. This is vital work.

As with all organisations Covid has resulted in a lot of activity having to now be conducted remotely however we have moved our seminar programme online which has been successful, and we have seen increased hits to our website over the course of the year, with a popular Rural Bulletin service published weekly to all members.

In the year 2019-20 the SPARSE-Rural and Rural Assembly collective debated amongst other issues: -

- Brexit – the impact on rural communities
- Discussions centred around the Government’s response to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy.
- Rural Conference 2019
- Rural Dementia Challenges and Solutions
- The Rural Economy (including in National Park Areas)
- Closure of Rural Pubs
- Rural Bus Services
- The Time for a Rural Strategy Campaign
- Business Rate Retention Consultation
- Needs and Resources Consultation

In addition, thematic groups continue to explore the challenges facing the Economy in rural areas and Health and Social Care in rural areas.

The RSN is concerned about the lack of focus by Government on English Rural Areas. We have begun a campaign calling on Government to undertake A Rural Strategy as we leave the EU. To date we have had well attended additional meetings looking for regional perspectives and views in Taunton, Newcastle, Kendall and Chichester solely in relation to this matter and we plan further events centred around gaining the perspective from the Midlands Region.

The RSN hosted a successful conference at the University of Gloucestershire in Cheltenham in Sept 2019 which focused on “Creating Vibrant Communities”. It was in association with CCRI and was sponsored by the Post Office. This event enabled the member authorities to attend and hear from expert speakers and debate key issues around rural service delivery.

We hosted seven free seminars/networking meetings for member authorities to attend at venues around England offering the opportunity for further explore and discuss key topics impacting on rural local authorities.

We provide the Secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services.

The RSN however is not just about meetings and we provide a wide range of services to our member authorities which include:

- The Rural Bulletin featuring rural news stories, rural commentary, and analysis
- Rural Observatory providing a statistical view of rural life
- Neighbourhood Planning Evidence Base for Parishes of Member Authorities
- Bulletin of Funding opportunities
- Information on Consultations impacting on rural areas

Further information about our work and services can be found at our comprehensive website on www.rsnonline.org.uk