

LGA Special Interest Group Annual Report to LGA Leadership Board

SIG Name:	Rural Services Network
Lead Member:	Councillor Cecilia Motley (Shropshire Council)
Lead Officer:	Graham Biggs MBE

Aim

The rural areas of England cover 79% of its land mass and some 20% of the English population live here. England's rural areas are however spread in differing areas and pockets throughout the country. Our aim is to bring them together in one network to facilitate sharing of best practice, knowledge exchange and national representation and work on rural issues and concerns. It is vital that there is an independent organisation that wholly represents the rural service and governance issues and we now act alone in that role as other larger organisations who have been doing this have now largely, as a result of the austerity measures, ceased to exist. Our ambition therefore is to cover with our paid services not just member areas but eventually those of all councils with a significant rural area in their operational patch. There is a need in what are really difficult times for all English rural areas to be working together.

Key Activities / Outcomes of work undertaken

The Rural Services Network is the collective name for work coming from a range of areas and the organisation has a wide range of subgroups. Whilst the Rural Assembly meetings bring together general rural argument in the way the previous LGA Rural Commission once did, the Sparse Rural group concentrates on rural funding not only in relation to Local Government but also concerning Health and Public Health, Transport, Housing, and Social Care. In this connection we work with the Rural Fair Share Group of MPs at Westminster. The Assembly works at Westminster through the Rural Services APPG and we also seek arrangements in the Commons on Rural Vulnerability and a Rural Panel of members of the House of Lords. Other sub groups exist for Rural Fire and Rescue Services and Rural Health, Social Care and Vulnerability, and for service deliverers outside Local Government (The Rural Services Partnership Ltd).

We hold an Annual Rural Conference in Cheltenham in early September, and we now plan two (Health and Public Health) Conferences a year. We also have five (free to members) Seminars a year and both The Rural Assembly and Sparse Rural meet twice yearly at the LGA. We also have sub arrangements dealing with Rural Crime, Housing, Economic Development and Transport.

Currently as said we have 147 rural local authorities in membership. Our workload is heavy. In 16/17 our meetings dealt with:-

- Rural Services Overview
- Annual Financial Settlements

- Business Rate Retention and the accompanying needs assessment
- Rural Vulnerability
- Social Care
- Priority Services Listing
- Economic Growth
- Rural Transport Services
- Rural Doctors
- Housing in the Countryside
- Broadband and Mobile Phone Services
- Rural Fuel Poverty
- Rural Post Office and Royal Mail Services
- Development in Rural Areas
- Small Businesses in Rural Areas

If an authority is in membership, we give free community service to their Parish and Town Councils. Our weekly news Digest therefore goes out to 23,000 e mail addresses each week. We also have periodic newsletters specialising on rural issues concerning young people, older people, heart of the village, health, vulnerability issues, grant availability, and current consultations.

Recognising that attendance at meetings for Councillors from rural areas is not always possible we run sounding boards on rural issues to obtain consensus views on issues as they happen both at principal council and parish level. We wish to widen these sounding boards to also cover rural small businesses, school governors, and younger people. Eventually we wish to achieve a representatively balanced Rural Panel so that there can be no longer any difficulty in rural getting across a consensus view on rural issues.