



The Rural Services Network

National Rural Conference 2024

Delivering for Rural – Unlocking rural prosperity

Monday 16th September

Rural Economy & Regeneration Session

AI GENERATED SUMMARY OF THE SESSION

Rural Economy and Regeneration Discussion

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, hosted a session on the Rural Economy and Regeneration. She thanked the sponsors who made the event possible and proceeded to share her slides on the rural economy.

Rural Economy Challenges and Investment Strategies

Kerry highlighted the rural economy's challenges, including lower productivity, fewer jobs, and a decreasing working-age population. She highlighted issues such as a lack of affordable housing, poor connectivity, and inadequate transport options. Kerry also mentioned the need for a diverse economy and the importance of devolving funds and decision-making to local areas. She mentioned the Rural Services All-Party Parliamentary Group, which has set priorities for the year ahead, including rural fair funding, the rural economy, affordable rural housing, rural transport, and rural health and care.

Framing Communication: Rural Investment and Community Action

Kathryn Lewis, Research Engagement Manager for NICRE (National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise) discussed the concept of framing in communication. Kathryn explained how framing can tap into existing values and beliefs, using the example of the shift in public opinion on marriage equality. Kathryn shared research on how to best position the case for rural investment, focusing on the language used and the mental structures people hold about rural areas. Findings showed that while stating the facts of inequality was persuasive, it often came up against the belief that everyone in rural areas is doing okay. The most successful framing was "community action," which resonated with people's belief that rural areas have been neglected and have had to become more resilient. Kathryn emphasized the importance of using straightforward language, acknowledging misconceptions, and avoiding an "us versus them" mentality between rural and urban areas.

Public Opinion, Emotions, and Rural Investment Strategies

Kathryn noted that people generally support more rural investment, regardless of their location, and that the framing of the issue can significantly impact public opinion. She also highlighted that people tend to believe statistics that align with their existing beliefs. Kathryn suggested that policymakers, like the general public, are influenced by emotions and personal stories, and that

these should be incorporated into presentations to them. Cllr Wendy Fredericks from North Norfolk emphasized the importance of tailoring messages to specific audiences, using real-life scenarios to illustrate the need for affordable homes and healthcare services in rural areas. Graham Biggs from the RSN added that policymakers appreciate real-life stories and the consequences of not investing in rural areas, and that these should be included in presentations to them.

Economic Growth, Funding Simplification, and Rural Development

Till Specht, Head of Funding Design and Strategy at Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government discussed the next steps for local growth funding, emphasizing the need to streamline and simplify the complex funding landscape. Till highlighted the ongoing devolution agenda and the department's focus on reducing the monitoring burden and empowering local authorities. The Funding Simplification Doctrine was introduced, aiming to create a simplified funding landscape for the multi-year spending review. Till acknowledged delegates desire for longer funding periods and a targeted approach to ensure rural areas are not left behind.

Net Park's 20th Anniversary and Future Growth

Sarah Slaven, Managing Director of Business Durham discussed the 20th anniversary of Net Park, a leading science park in Sedgefield, County Durham. Established in 2000, the park has transitioned the local economy from traditional industries to higher value, skill-based jobs, and is home to over 40 businesses, employing over 700 people. The Park's success is attributed to its collaborative innovation community, partnerships with Durham University and CPI, and a dedicated team from Business Durham.

Net Park Site Success and Community Integration

Sarah discussed the key ingredients for success at the Net Park site, emphasizing the importance of a long-term vision, commitment, and investment. She highlighted the site's efforts to be a good neighbour and part of the local community, including supporting local initiatives and maintaining dialogue with the community. Sarah addressed concerns about transportation links, stating that the site is on a main bus route and that they are working to improve these further. She also clarified that the site is not part of a free port. Sarah concluded by expressing confidence that the allocated land for employment will be sufficient for the next 10 years and that the site's design will be sensitive to the environment and landscape.

Rural Economy Growth and Collaboration Challenges

The meeting focused on the potential for rural economies to grow and contribute significantly to the national economy. The speakers emphasized the need for longer-term funding horizons and collaboration across borders to achieve this growth. They also discussed the challenges faced by local authorities in balancing economic development with constrained budgets. The speakers agreed on the importance of engaging with stakeholders and working together to achieve common goals. The conversation ended with a discussion on the potential impact of economic development on council budgets, with some speakers expressing concern about the sustainability of this non-statutory function.

Addressing Rural Challenges and Funding Concerns

Carole Barr from ACT Cumbria discussed the impact of large projects on local communities and the need for community-led projects. She also highlighted the importance of supporting community-run businesses in rural areas. Cllr Roger Phillips, RSN Chair, emphasized the challenges faced by rural areas in terms of infrastructure and the need for government support. Chris Shears from South West Devon shared his team's experience with UKSPF and the challenges of funding when the program ends. Cllr Julian German from Cornwall raised concerns about the funding for his team and the potential impact on staff. Till acknowledged the challenges of multiple funding streams and the need for consistency. Kerry shared a slide from the National Alliance for Cultural Services, highlighting the complexity of funding streams. The session finished by highlighting the consultation on the National Planning Policy Framework

(NPPF) housing targets to which the RSN will be making a formal response on behalf of its membership.

Next Steps

1. RSN to contact MHCLG to see how they can contribute to shaping metrics for future funding allocations to ensure that are targeted for rural areas.
2. RSN to share upcoming research commissioned by the Rural Coalition and conducted by Pragmatix Advisory on the potential of the rural economy to contribute £billions nationally if given the opportunity to reach its full potential.