| Prosperous Communities Committee |
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| **Tuesday 16th July 2019** |

**Subject: Report to Support the Rural Services Network Proposal for a Fully Funded Government Rural Strategy**

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| Report by: | Executive Director of Resources and Head of Paid Service |
| Contact Officer: | Ian Knowles<br>Executive Director of Resources and Head of Paid Service<br><br>ian.knowles@west-lindsey.gov.uk |
| Purpose / Summary: | This report is designed to support the Rural Services Network for a fully funded Government Rural Strategy |

**RECOMMENDATION(S):** Members are asked to:

1. Agree that the challenges set out in this report are the challenges that a fully funded Rural Strategy would need to address

2. Agree to support the RSN by asking the Chair of the Prosperous Communities Committee to write to Sir Edward Leigh and the relevant government minister in support of the RSN campaign for a fully funded Rural Strategy ahead of Brexit.

**IMPLICATIONS**

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| **Legal:** |

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| **Financial: FIN/50/20/TJB** |
| The Rural Services Delivery Grant totalled £474k in 2019/20. |
| It is important that rural councils continue to lobby for a fairer funding for rural communities. |

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| **Staffing:** |

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| **Equality and Diversity including Human Rights:** |

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| **Risk Assessment:** |

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| **Climate Related Risks and Opportunities:** |

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| **Title and Location of any Background Papers used in the preparation of this report:** |
| Lords Select Committee – Rural Economy Committee: |
| https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/rural-economy/publications/ |
| Rural Services Network: |
| https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/time-for-a-rural-strategy |

**Call in and Urgency:**

**Is the decision one which Rule 14.7 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules apply?**

Yes ☐   No ☐

**Key Decision:**

Yes ☐   No ☐

**1.0 Introduction**
WLDC has been a member of the Rural Services Network (RSN) for many years and it has been a source of many lobbying successes, not least of which was the introduction of the Rural Services Delivery Grant in 2015.

RSN have issued a paper urging government to establish a fully funded Rural Strategy ahead of Brexit. The Authority issued a press release promoting the RSN press release in March this year.

At its meeting on 4th March, Full Council received a motion from Cllr Bierley seeking support from the Council for the RSN campaign. At that meeting, the matter was referred to Prosperous Communities Committee.

This report fulfils Council requirement for this committee to consider the RSN campaign for government to establish a fully funded Rural Strategy ahead of Brexit.

**2.0 Background**
The paper makes a case for a fully funded Rural Strategy for a number of reasons, including the so called "rural mainstreaming…[leading]…to policies which are inappropriate in a sparsely populated or rural setting." The paper states that a Rural Strategy would "raise rural opportunities and challenges up the political agenda…"

The paper argues that there is a compelling case for a fully funded Rural Strategy and identifies the following as policy challenges common to most rural places.

| Policy Challenge | Local Context |
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| **Ageing:** Rural areas have a high proportion of residents in older age groups, raising demand for services such as health and social care. Moreover, growth in the population aged 85 or over is expected to happen fastest in rural areas. | • West Lindsey continues to have an ageing population. Large areas of the Lincoln Fringe, such as Saxilby, Nettleham, Cherry Willingham, Lea and Torksey are classified as having rapidly ageing populations.<br>• By 2036, projections show that 32% of the local population will be aged 65 or over higher than the UK projection of 26%<br>• The average age of West Lindsey residents is 47, significantly higher than the UK average (40). |
| **Living Costs:** the cost of housing is typically high, whilst local wages in rural areas are 10% below the national average, leading to severe affordability issues. Costs of transport and infrastructure and home heating are also higher than average in rural areas. | • The local average salary is £6.6k lower per annum than the national average.<br>• 24.2% of children in West Lindsey are living in poverty after housing costs are taken into consideration. This figure is higher in more rural areas of the district. Child poverty is projected to rise over the next decade.<br>• 9.3% of local residents are living in fuel poverty, higher than the regional average. Fuel poverty is more prevalent in more rural areas of the district |

| Policy Challenge | Local Context |
|---|---|
| **Infrastructure:** it is relatively costly to build infrastructure, like broadband and mobile phone networks, putting many rural homes and businesses at a disadvantage. Maintaining rural roads is also an issue. | • 87.3% of West Lindsey residents have access to superfast broadband, significantly lower than the UK average of 96.1%<br>• The parliamentary constituency of Gainsborough is ranked 578 out of 650 for broadband coverage, speed and connectivity |
| **Accessibility:** limited public transport options often leave vulnerable groups isolated or without ready access to jobs, training, key services and social opportunities. | • People living in rural areas such as West Lindsey have, an average one hour local travel time to the nearest hospital, double that of urban areas.<br>• The average commute to places with 5,000 or more jobs is 56 minutes in rural areas compared to urban areas. |
| **Delivery:** organisations responsible for delivering services to rural communities face added costs due to the time and expense of travelling, a need to operate from multiple service outlets and lost economies of scale. | • West Lindsey is one of the largest and most rural local authority areas in the country. Its size, topography and rural nature places added costs on to organisations responsible for delivering services. |
| **Perception:** portrayals of rural life often paint a stereotypical and affluent picture, failing to recognise the very real poverty that exists. | • Compared to the rest of Lincolnshire, access to services is classed as 'moderate' to 'poor' in areas outside Gainsborough and Market Rasen<br>• West Lindsey ranks 249 out of 324 local authority areas on the vibrant economy index, placing the district in the bottom quartile<br>• See 'living costs' section above for further detail around poverty |

The paper argues that 24% of all registered businesses in England (547,000) are based in rural areas; that 11% of all premises in England's rural areas are unable to access high speed broadband (defined at speeds of 10mbps); that residents living in small rural settlements (villages and hamlets) travel an average of 10,055 miles per year (in 2016/17) which is 54% more than the average for residents in urban towns and cities; and that average house prices in rural areas are £44,000 higher than urban areas (2017) making housing less affordable in predominantly rural areas.

**3.0 The Rural Challenge**
The attached document defines the rural challenge as:

**Rural Economy - reducing the productivity gap:**
• Helping rural businesses to grow locally
• Supporting further diversification, especially into high value-added sectors
• Sustaining high streets and their businesses and their businesses in rural towns and
• Creating better paid and more secure jobs

**Digitally Connected Countryside – extending broadband networks to those premises still missing out:**
• Future-proofing broadband policy so rural areas do not fall behind again

- Capitalising on the benefits from the roll out of superfast networks
- Addressing issues with mobile network coverage (4G)

**A place that everyone can get around – Reversing the widespread decline in rural bus service provision:**
- Making bus services a more attractive option for rural travellers
- Providing sustained support for complementary community transport schemes
- Ensuring future transport innovations will benefit rural communities

**An Affordable Place to Live:**
- Bringing forward development sites at a price suited to affordable housing
- Making sure such homes are, and remain genuinely affordable
- Planning new housing in ways which attract community support
- Ensuring the funding model for affordable house building adds up

**A Fair Deal on Health and Safety – ensuring that patients can get to secondary and tertiary health services**
- Delivering quality primary health care locally within rural settings
- Making sure social care reaches those who need it in remote locations
- Benefitting rural clients through improved health and social care integration

**A Place to Learn and Grow**
- Sustaining schools with small (or fluctuating) pupil numbers
- Managing school budgets when operating costs are high
- Recruiting and retaining teaching and support staff
- Finding appropriate models for school collaboration

**A Settlement to Support Local Action**
- Ensuring that local authorities retain the capacity to serve their rural communities
- Boosting the capacity of parish and town councils to bring about local solutions
- Recruiting and retaining volunteers with sufficient time and the right skills
- Providing the support infrastructure to facilitate community action in more areas

**A Rural Proofed Policy Framework**
- Reaffirming the rural proofing commitment and placing it on a firmer footing
- Providing sufficient staff and resources to carry on the rural proofing function
- Making it clearer what rural proofing actions policy makers are taking
- Ensuring that rural proofing filters down more consistently to the local level

**4.0 Conclusion**

The document attached as Appendix A makes proposals for how these challenges set out above and in more detail in the document could be addressed by a fully funded government Rural Strategy. Members are invited to visit the Rural Services Network website to individually add their names to the call for this strategy (link provided in background papers).