

## **LGA RURAL CONFERENCE 2010**

**Joint report produced by Cllr Andrew Bowles, Chairman of the LGA Rural Commission, Leader Swale Borough Council and Cllr David Simmons, Executive Member for Environment and Rural Affairs.**

***(going to Executive Members for info and to the Swale Rural Forum, possible Leaders Statement for 13 October 2010)***

The annual Local Government Association Rural Commission and Conference was held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel at Chester on Tuesday 7 and Wednesday 8 September. Cllr Bowles as Chair of the Rural Commission chaired both days, Cllr David Simmons attended as Portfolio Holder for Environment and Rural Affairs.

### **7 September 2010**

On the morning of the Rural Commission Meeting delegates were addressed by Richard Benyon MP the Minister for the Natural Environment and Fisheries within the DEFRA team. Due to work commitments the address and question and answer session was conducted by video link with the Minister in his offices in London. Thankfully the system worked very well and the Minister was very clear both visually and orally and he could see the individual delegates asking questions. The Minister informed delegates that he is busy holding meetings with ministers in other Government departments in order to mainstream rural policies. He announced that there will be a Government statement on rural policies in late autumn. He offered a meeting between himself, Cllr Bowles plus Matthew Taylor on the subject of rural housing. Mathew Taylor is now a member of the House of Lords but prior to the last election a Lib Dem MP who produced a report on rural housing for the last Government.

During the Q&A session the minister gave full and frank answers to questions including some on areas of outstanding natural beauty, agriculture, rural shops and post offices.

The next plenary session was entitled Friends Families and Travellers and was presented by Chris Whitwell the Director of Friends, Families and Travellers and John Parry of Oxfordshire County Council. It may interest members to know that Oxfordshire currently delivers Gypsy and Traveller services for Buckinghamshire and the London Borough of Brent and is currently seeking further contracts.

After lunch on day one we received a paper from Cllr Peter Box the new Chair of the Local Government Group (LGA) Economy and Transport Board. His paper covered three main areas firstly reforming the way we form and fund infrastructure, secondly support for local bus services and thirdly concessionary travel in a wider context. The full text of Peter's speech is available but I will pick out two facts: firstly although only 18% of families in rural areas do not own a car approx 50% of people in these households do not have access to a car ie where the main wage earner has use the car to

travel to work. Second fact subsidy to bus services now stands at £2.9 billion per year and accounts for 60% of the industries turn over. Despite this, outside of London, Central and Local Government have very little control over the coverage, fares or standards of services supported.

The next presentation was one on rural money matters and financial inclusion in rural areas from Will Ashton the Rural Financial Inclusion Champion at the Dept of Work and Pensions.

We finished the day by breaking into workshop sessions and Cllr Bowles attending the one on Community Engagement and Local Environmental Governance whilst Cllr Simmons attended the workshop on Rural Housing. The workshop Cllr Bowles attended covered community initiatives in environmental protection, such as the Loweswater care project in the Lake District, peat land management in the Peaks National Park and local flood risk management. I do have some booklets available which relate to this session.

The workshop on Rural Housing looked at future provision without grants. There is a need to change the mindset of village populations. Recent Government announcements seem to be giving some encourage to rural house building.

## **8 September 2010**

On the second day we started off on with the first day of the Conference with a presentation from Julian Cowans the Development Manager of Next Generation Broadband from the Cornwall Council on rural broadband and the various options that have been trialled at different parts of the country. Particularly interesting to hear from Cornwall due to the initiative of the new Unitary County Council, 85% of the county will be carbon fibre linked. Total cost of this investment is £100m.

The second session was on seeking to preserve rural public houses and the licensing and brewery trade in general. We had a presentation by Bridget Simmonds the Chief Executive of BBPA. There are 52,000 plus public houses of which 50% approximately are tied. There is a net closure of 39 public houses per week but interestingly nationally this is largely in urban and sub urban areas. Alcohol consumption nationally is down and 70% of alcohol is now sold off trade especially via supermarkets. The second speaker was Clare Slater of Ryedale District Council in Yorkshire, 85% of the villages in Ryedale have produced community plans and so far every single one has mentioned the local pub/s. Ryedale has adopted a risk based approach to inspection to attempt to ensure that local Government bureaucracy is not a contributory factor to future closures.

The rest of the day was made up of workshop sessions which were repeated so each delegate could do 2 out of the 4. Cllr Bowles attended the session on local food and drink, this was a very interesting presentation based on an initiative in East Anglia to develop a virtual distribution hub to develop small

and medium sized producers to access potential outlets including public sector contracts.

Cllr Simmons attended the workshop on rural fuel poverty and climate change. Many rural properties are older with solid walls, rural incomes are lower and a high percentage of rural households have no mains gas for heating. All of which mean that fuel poverty is a significant and growing issue for rural communities.

The conference closed with an address by Stuart Burgess CBE Chair, Commission for Rural Communities which the Government has announced will be closing in the spring. Dr Burgess was also until recently the Government Rural Advocate. In light of the closure of the CRC and the removal of the post of Rural Advocate it will fall increasingly to the Rural Commission to adopt the Advocacy role on behalf of the rural areas and to hold ministers to account.

All the presentations should now be available on the Local Government website : <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pagelId=13803732>