

Report for LGA Rural Policy Review Group:

The latest meeting of the Rural Policy Review Group of the Local Government Association (LGA) took place on Thursday 6 June at the Local Government offices in Westminster. This was one of the best meetings of the Group that I have ever attended. The first item was as usual a review of the Minutes of the previous meeting and an update of the work of the Rural Commissions office holders and LGA officers since then.

Amongst items covered under this heading were the LGA's submission to Central Government on the Spending Review and EU funding powers for Local Government. There was also an update on the Growth and Infrastructure Act that received Royal Assent on the 25 April. Additionally a report was presented on the LGA's submission to the Royal Institution of Surveyors Housing Commission, this focused on our belief that local councils and the planning system are supportive of growth, the real barrier is the lack of finance both to build and to buy new houses. There were further reports on developments with regard to the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), the Government's response to Lord Heseltine's report 'No stone unturned in pursuit of growth' and the transfer of health powers to local authorities and local authority led Universal Credit Pilots.

Of particular interest to some Swale Borough Council Members is the LGA's response to the Government discussion paper on making it easier to set up new town and parish councils.

The Annual Rural Commission and Conference was confirmed for the 3 and 4 September at Warwick, Cllr David Simmons as the Rural Portfolio Holder and myself will be attending.

We then had a plenary session on the Social Care challenges for rural communities led by Cllr Colin Noble who is both a Member of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board and the Cabinet Member for Finance and Property at Suffolk County Council having previously been the County Council Portfolio Holder for Community Wellbeing. One noticeable statistic to come forward from this was that the NHS on its own consumes 1/6 of UK National Expenditure. There is a universal realisation that providing care in rural communities almost always involves additional cost, for example the diseconomies of scale, the additional travel time involved and what is typically in rural areas an older population. The use of 'Village Angels' has been successfully trialled in some parts of the country notably Gloucestershire. It was strongly felt there should be a co-ordinating role here for District and Parish Councils.

Although the Care Bill sets out with the intent to secure a diverse provider market for social care it has to be noted that in many rural areas there is a distinct lack of choice of providers.

The following plenary session was on the LGA Waste Review and particularly on treating waste as a useable asset rather than as something to be disposed of. The afternoon was devoted to a discussion on the next spending round and the submission put forward by the LGA. The discussion was led by the Vice Chairman of the LGA Finance Panel and Cabinet Member for Finance at that well known rural council of Westminster Cllr Melvin Caplan. On a serious note it was actually a very well structured and very interesting debate.

I will leave the agenda and background papers with my Personal Assistant Janet Dart should any Member wish to read further into the subjects. I will also circulate the Minutes when received.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Council Leader
17 June 2013