

Devon Churches Rural Forum Meeting Notes from 14th July 2021

10 am to 12 noon - By Zoom

1 Archdeacon Douglas opened the meeting with prayer. Prayers were offered particularly for Rev'd Dr Susanna Metz who is poorly at this time.

2 **Welcome and introductions**

Present were: Douglas Dettmer (Archdeacon of Totnes in the chair), Penny Body (Secretary), Graham Biggs (CEO Rural Services Network), Nora Corkery (CEO Devon Communities Together), Mark Betson (National Rural Officer C of E), Stuart Wilson (Market Chaplain), Dave Watson (Methodist Lay Minister), Howard Wilson (Regional Learning and Development Coordinator (South West) - The Methodist Church), Ruth Frampton (Team Rector), Danny Semorad (Farmer, Church Warden, Devon Historic Churches Trust), Marisa Cockfield (Team Vicar, Police Chaplain, Exeter Diocese Mental Health Round Table), Sarah Cracknell (Project Manager Growing the Rural Church), John Wibberley (Agronomist and Chair Devon FCN), Chris Keppie (Diocese of Exeter Church and Society and Environment Officer), Sylvia West (Deanery Synod Secretary and DFWI), Jane Skinner (Team Rector), Martin Beck (Devon and Cornwall Police Rural Crime Officer), Dave Thubron (Devon and Cornwall Police, Rural Crime Team, and lead for the Christian Police Association for Devon and Cornwall Police).

The chair especially welcomed Graham Biggs, Nora Corkery and Mark Betson all speaking to our main theme of "Levelling Up in the Rural Context".

Martin Beck introduced his colleague, Sgt David Thubron, to the Forum. Dave is a community sergeant in North Devon and lead for our Christian Police Association. Whilst Martin covers the county in the work of preventing rural crime, Dave works directly with the community teams and Martin is keen to build up connectivity between the community work of the local police on the ground and the work of the church.

This will be Chris Keppie's last meeting as the Church and Society Officer for the Diocese of Exeter as he is moving on to pastures new. The chair thanked Chris for all his work, his ability to be able to make connections across diverse areas and especially for his support for the Forum and for rural issues in Devon, and wished him well for the future.

3 **Apologies** were received from Simon Leigh, Richard Taylor, Andy Jerrard, Jane Hayes, Richard Yarwood, Jane Frost, Elizabeth Burke, Stephen Derges, Janet May, Simon Franklin.

Simon Franklin has offered his resignation from the DCRF following his retirement and the chair thanked him for all his contributions to the DCRF particularly in the areas of models for, and theological reflection on, rural ministry and in his work on developing training models in rural ministry for ordinands. He is happy to continue to contribute to the Forum if there is a specific area he can help with.

Stephen Derges's responsibilities at his home church have increased significantly and he is taking a step back from the DCRF but would like to be kept informed about our work. Stephen has been Ambassador for the Arthur Rank Centre for the South West and thanks everyone for their welcome during his time on the Forum.

4 [Notes from the last meeting](#) on 8th February were agreed.

5 **Matters and actions arising from the last meeting** (not covered elsewhere on the agenda).

All the links mentioned in the last meeting have been added to our website and can be found as below:

- [Prevention of metal theft](#), [rural crime update](#), [downloadable lead theft warning poster](#), [Operation Crucible risk form for churches with lead on their rooves](#). All these will also be sent out with our next newsletter.
- Chris's presentation on "[Net carbon in a rural context](#)"
- Information on the Befriending project "[Linking Lives](#)"

6 **Main Item – The Levelling Up Agenda applied to Rural Areas**

6.1 **Graham Biggs – Rural Services Network**

Graham is the CEO of the Rural Services Network and was previously the CEO of a large rural local authority – Shropshire. He retired 2009 and started the RSN with his colleague David England. Read Graham's full presentation and find the link to the Rural Services Network Revitalising Rural Campaign [here](#)

Graham explained the structure of the RSN including 214 non local authority organisations that are part of the Rural Services Partnership – a very diverse range of organisations - this is the category of membership the DCRF has joined.

He said our rural areas face special challenges in many ways. The Rural Services Network's (RSN) initial campaign for a cross government rural strategy, aiming for equity for rural areas both in financial and policy outcomes, began in March 2019. At this time the house of Lords also appointed a select committee on the rural economy. The report sets the scene as follows:

In their report, the House of Lords Rural Economy Committee argued that "successive governments have underrated the contribution rural economies can make to the nation's prosperity and wellbeing". In addition, the committee stated that governments have "applied policies which were largely devised for urban and suburban economies, and which are often inappropriate for rural England". The committee said that to enable the rural economy to fulfil its potential the Government should:

- *develop a rural strategy;*
- *ensure improved "rural-proofing" is applied to all policies; and*
- *institute a "place-based approach" which takes into account the diversity of the countryside.*

A summary and link to the full report of the select committee can be found [here](#).

The current campaign ([Revitalising Rural](#)) (launched in March 2021) calls for a fairer distribution of resources and more nuanced national policies that reflect rural circumstances. It includes fourteen areas of intertwined policy (Slide 8).

Each chapter contains information about why the subject matters, the national policy context, the rural policy context, policy solutions and high level “asks” of government. Please see the Revitalising Rural links and documents (above) for details. This is the RSNs policy document for the life of this parliament.

The RSN is constantly working to raise the profile of the campaign across government and more widely, though Graham said that engagement with parliamentarians is not easy at present, especially with Covid. However, the RSN is able to respond to consultations and view the various white papers that arise through a rural lens and once something is actually on the government’s agenda it is easier to engage effectively. He added that around half of the legislation announced in this year’s Queen’s Speech does not need primary legislation. It is therefore necessary to be aware of the progress of such items and be able to input from a rural perspective.

The campaign’s policies are high level and Graham said the RSN aims to add depth and texture through case studies etc. (something the church can help with – see later). In addition, the RSN will hold a conference in September and hope to bring the campaign to life by considering how each policy area affects people in different age groups who are living with these issues in our rural life.

The Revitalising Rural documents are kept up to date with the many changes in both national and rural policy context.

6.2 **Mark Betson – National Rural Officer – Church of England**

Mark is the national Rural Officer for the Church of England and is also a member of the team supporting the church’s response to Covid.

He spoke about the Church of England as a major rural organisation with a real interest in the countryside and a primary focus on the well-being of the communities in which it are based. The rural church is in a unique position to be involved in local issues and can build relationships, facilitate local groups coming together and partner with others such as town and parish councils to help things to happen.

He explained that nationally, the C of E is involved in rural policy through the House of Lords where Bishop Alan Smith (Bishop of St Alban’s) currently holds the rural brief. Bishop Robert (Exeter) is the national rural lead for the Church of England and as such met with Lord Benyon from Defra just last week to discuss rural concerns. The church of England also engages with policy by responding to particular government consultations.

6.3 **Nora Corkery – Devon Communities Together (DCT)**

[Devon Communities Together](#) is the Community Council of Devon – a voluntary

organisation which stands alongside and supports rural communities in Devon. It is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year. It looks at the issues that affect people's lives in rural areas, and Nora described it as a "strength-based" organisation, identifying the strengths that we have in rural areas and using them to benefit their communities. Nora herself has a background in rural advocacy and social justice, including long service in CAB.

DCT is also part of [ACRE](#) – (Action with Communities in Rural England) which, like the RSN, is a national network. ACRE works with the RSN and has been actively supporting the "Revitalising Rural" campaign.

The main topic of Nora's talk was about Health Inequalities in Devon – her presentation is available [here](#). She presented data showing huge inequalities in life expectancy, years of illness free life, people needing long term care, alcohol dependency and more in Devon. She emphasised that these were not just numbers but people's lives. As always the situation is complicated and there is no easy fix. We have a mix of remote rural settlements, isolated dwellings, coastal and peripheral rural communities and all have different needs and different levels of access to care. A "one size" model of health and care provision does not fit all.

She said "Multiple Indices of Deprivation" are used for planning for health as in many service areas, but these can mask rural needs which are more diverse and include pockets of high deprivation. The total population in Devon is marginally more rural than urban and Nora highlighted recent research and work on rural deprivation mapping. This has been done for Devon and DCT working with others on how to take this forward to help services to be more responsive to local need.

The rural social determinants of health are listed in Nora's presentation and include lower educational attainment, gender inequality, low wages, part time work, limited child care, food security, older housing stock, fuel poverty, low levels of affordable housing, less public transport, less diverse childhood leisure activities and higher rates of loneliness in young people. She said there was a huge response in Devon in the pandemic with communities providing food through community larders etc. to families living in food poverty.

Despite the problems, Nora said she was pleased that rural health inequalities are being treated seriously in a way that haven't before. The new integrated care service is under development. DCT is playing its part as a strategic partner, highlighting rural health inequalities and hosting an on-line seminar on the subject in June and a new Devon Health Inequalities group will hopefully have big influence. Much can be achieved by working closely together with communities.

Nora spoke about the ["Rural Proofing for Health Toolkit"](#) published by Rural England in December 2020. This will help local organisations provide services that take better account of rural needs. Our local Integrated Care Service (ICS) is working with DCT testing new services using the new tool kit. This is the first time rural proofing has been part of service planning in this more formal way.

She asked "What can we all do?" Helping people to feel more involved in their communities through community life and activities has a good impact on health and

wellbeing outcomes as does promoting physical and access to nature. She also highlighted working together to gather intelligence locally to feed into decision makers and building place based partnerships. She said churches could get involved in local care partnerships which are where a lot of decisions will be made. DCT is part of broader voluntary and community sector and as part of the Covid Recovery Group is collaborating with public sector on ways in which voluntary sector can help.

6.4 **Discussion** (discussion has been recorded under topic rather than a linear record of the meeting)

6.4.1 **Rural Housing**

On rural housing, Dave Watson spoke about his son shortly to be married, who cannot get a house in the village he has been brought up in and six other young people in the same situation. The new houses being built locally are of an “executive” level and out of range of local people. Sylvia West spoke about young families in her local area who are facing rising rents and sleepless nights. Marisa spoke about a couple in their 80s who have a notice to quit their current home. They have seen over 30 properties but have never been quick enough. She also spoke of a family with 4 in a long term let where the house is being sold. However, there is nothing big enough for the whole family available.

Much work is needed on rural housing to take into account genuine affordability, housing design, including appropriate sizes, opportunities for families to upsize or downsize and construction materials. Mark added that it is really important to be able to enforce the planning rules and ensure that what is actually developed is what was originally agreed, especially with respect to affordable housing options.

Graham said that the RSN has always campaigned on rural housing and spoke about the knock on effects for rural business, workforce availability, health and social care and more, if people cannot live in the areas where they are needed to work. One of the issues is the definition of affordable housing which is 80% of market rent – but for local people on lower than average wages this is often still quite unaffordable. He also said government policy needs to take account of the social context as well as affordability when making policy.

Devon Housing Partnership is launching a new Devon Housing Hub. You can find out more about Devon Communities Together’s work on rural housing [here](#).

Mark said that churches can have a significant role in facilitating local conversations and get involved in Neighbourhood Planning processes. In some cases church land may be available for local building, especially for affordable housing for local people.

Community Land Trusts can also be vehicles for developing locally needed housing as well as working with developers, and the church can have a role to play in supporting these community groups – and in some instances may even have some church land that may be used for the purpose. Chris Keppie highlighted a recent affordable development - via a Community Land Trust - in Christow where 18 houses were built recently, of which 14 were 'genuinely affordable' and all built to the Passivhaus standard (of sustainability). The Community Land Trust Network website can be

accessed [here](#) for those desiring further information.

Post meeting notes related to affordable housing:

- This BBC article [“Guli Franci-Dehqani: The bishop tackling England’s housing crisis”](#) gives an interesting overview of her work with individual churches and dioceses to explore what local housing opportunities may be possible.
- As an example, the article highlights a housing project set up by Keswick Churches Together to provide homes for local people. Their website says

“KCHT is a Community Land Trust, run by volunteers, and was formed in response to a series of Churches Together in Keswick consultations in 2009. This highlighted the housing issues experienced in Keswick due to the combined impact of high house prices and second homes, low wages associated with the tourism industry, the loss of affordable housing through the Right to Buy, and the high cost of a housing association shared ownership scheme. Our aim is to provide homes for local people who cannot afford to buy or rent long-term accommodation at current market prices.”

If you are interested you can find further information [here](#).

- There is also reference to the Church of England report “Coming Home” about the housing crisis in Britain, published in February 2021. You can access the report via our website [here](#).

6.4.2 Helping churches become involved in rural social issues / Neighbourhood Audits and Plans

Picking up ideas about churches involvement with wider community issues, John Corrie said that the reality in many parishes was small elderly congregations occupied by “keeping the show on the road” with little time left for wider community engagement. Many people are engaged with the community as individuals by virtue of the different roles in the community that they hold. The challenge is to help the church “as the church”, rather than as individuals, to be engaged - so how do we help very small churches in this endeavour?

Mark spoke about the C of E [“Everyday Faith”](#) initiative and said that one of the ideas within this was to help people who are engaged in their local communities relate their activities to the life of the church. There are also opportunities that church leaders can create such as linking with parish councils like they do with schools. This helps people who are working in wider community roles to feel supported in their work.

Whilst recognising that many people are tired, he also said there are people in the community who look favourably on the church who would want to help, and engaging with things like community audits – or working with someone who is undertaking this kind of work where you have a very small group – to try and look at what as a church we might do to support the community – and vice versa - can be very helpful.

Douglas commented that John is in a deanery where three churches are beginning the process of closing. Some churches are tired – and buildings will have to close – and the expectation that buildings will always be there is breaking down.

Penny said we cannot underestimate how connected all the rural issues are to each other. Even if we had the housing we also need the employment opportunities for the younger people to live in those houses and the transport to enable them to get to work. And connectivity is vital to almost every aspect of life, especially for rural businesses. The church comes from a place of faith, but is interested in all aspects of rural life – housing, community life, health and more because of all those things make up life in all its fullness. This holistic approach lends itself to the church being involved in community development in the widest sense, and in its ability to bring different groups together in partnership.

Whilst it can be challenging to connect with the whole community - rather than sections - community audits can be very helpful. Organising a “Community Audit”, perhaps of gifts and community needs, can be a powerful message of service from a local church and this time of recovery from the pandemic is a good time to be looking at this.

Growing the Rural Church has a [website](#) that offers tools to help with community audits and much more and Sarah Cracknell and the project team are also available for [one to one support](#) and guidance.

It is also possible to partner with others in the community, and the Growing the Rural Church project team is well placed to help churches in Devon with this.

6.4.3 **Working Ecumenically**

Dave W, who is a parish councillor as well as a lay preacher, also encouraged all churches to get involved with the neighbourhood planning process and to work ecumenically wherever possible. Jane S concurred and spoke about the need to bring our contributions to the debate as people of faith working together ecumenically. She added that in rural areas particularly it had been necessary to translate Covid guidance into local ecumenical working arrangements and it would be helpful if this could be addressed.

6.4.4 **Training for Rural Specialists**

Penny – in reporting back on recent RSN seminars attended – highlighted a presentation in the rural health and social care seminar about a scheme to train doctors differently for rural work – so that instead of learning to be specialists in one field at a major training hospital they were learning to be specialists over a wider range in a more rural area. Teachers are also being trained specifically to work in a rural context. She found it interesting that there seems to be increasing recognition that different skills are needed for many roles in rural areas. In the DCRF we have had previous conversations about how to use the resources and experience of members of the Forum to bring to bear on our own training for rural ministry. It is hoped we can pick this up again at a future meeting.

6.4.5 What churches can do – Intelligence Gathering and Consultations

As noted earlier, both the RSN and DCT are always looking for more depth and structure to add life to academic descriptions. One way the churches can help with this is to feed in case studies from any of the policy areas that we have experience of in our local areas. Examples would include those brought forward earlier regarding rural housing. People can email Graham directly graham.biggs@sparse.gov.uk and similarly Nora suggested emailing either info@devoncommunities.org.uk or herself directly ncorkery@devoncommunities.org.uk.

Graham also highlighted the helpfulness of asking people – either from the local church or the person/family concerned – if they would be available to speak to the media about their story as whenever the RSN raise an issue with the media they are asked for a “real person” who can bring the story alive. He added that the people who influence politicians are their constituents and real stories are important from this point of view also.

Douglas added that the Citizens Advice Bureau always had twin aims – one to help people – and secondly to gather the information gained in helping people to influence social policy. He said that in the churches we do really well being involved and helping people – but we are less good at using all the information we gain this way to influence the course of affairs of the country – a point Chris said had also been made recently by Dame Louise Casey (the ex homelessness czar). Chris also highlighted the third and fourth points of the Anglican '5 marks of mission' which puts this in a different way: #3: To respond to human need by loving service plus #4: To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation. He was pleased to hear ways of being able to feed case studies through RSN and DCT.

As part of the RSN, and through other networks, the DCRF will from time to time be invited to comment on various relevant government consultations. This offers another way we can feed back.

Action: As well as individuals feeding into RSN and DCT, Penny will work with Douglas to develop a process to collect and collate case studies via the DCRF.

7 Farming

The latest farming update can be found on our website [here](#). Penny thanked all who had contributed to this. It includes information about crops and weather but also the Environmental Land Management Strategy (ELMS) and various other farming issues of the day. We will be picking up all these and more for discussion at our forthcoming farm visit.

Danny added that to begin with people were quite positive about ELMS but the detail is not finalised and many are waiting to see what will happen. In the meantime, the BPS payments are going down and there will be a shortfall of income this year. There is talk of a loss of around 30% of small farms which will be a big loss for the rural areas. However he said prices are good at present though input costs are going up.

Douglas thanked Danny for hosting the farm visit which will take place at Danny's farm, Barton Farm, Bondleigh, on August 4th (booking via Penny). Danny farms 200 beef cattle and cereals. The visit will begin at 12 noon with lunch, offered by Danny and Jane Semorad, with donations if desired for the FCN. The afternoon will end with a short service of evening prayer in Bondleigh church at 3.30pm.

Following the excellent Plough Sunday service, the FCN Lammas Day service can be viewed on you tube [here](#)

8 Feedback from meetings attended

Chris Keppie, Dave Watson and Simon Leigh all attended the meeting hosted by the Clewer Initiative regarding the Farm Welfare App and Modern Slavery in a rural context. Chris reported:

In addition to the existing particular challenges of rural slavery compared to urban (reduced passing footfall, and fewer public visits to farms compared to nail bars/car washes etc. - so less visibility for both reasons), there's also a new Brexit issue of a need for c.80k additional agricultural workers from overseas (based on previous years), but the govt has stipulated quota limits of 30k from Europe post-Brexit (from 4 main agencies) – hence 50k shortfall, very likely to be met by criminal gangs... Obviously a need for employers to question agents as to how good reliability of labour, to be aware of signs, including by getting to know their workers. Another key point stressed was the continuing increase of county lines exploitation of vulnerable homeless people – with cars/vans appearing in evenings (mainly in urban areas) to offer accommodation & drugs in exchange for 'work', and taking groups off there and then: something to look out for. Similarly in and around food banks.

A summary of resources provided by the Clewer Initiative on this subject can be found on our website [here](#)

9 Notices and Events

The Agricultural Christian Fellowship is hosting a seminar on 30th October via zoom entitled "Countryside at the Crossroads" – details will be circulated when available.

Rural Mission Sunday is 18th July – see [ARC website](#) for details.

18th July - 9.30am, modern day slavery service from St David's, Led by Chris Forster of Transforming Together, and referencing the Clewer Initiative

To keep our "What's On" page up to date please send details of any events etc. to Penny.

<https://www.devonchurchesruralforum.org.uk/whats-on/events-conferences-workshops/>

10 **AOB**

Policing – Dave Thubron was pleased to connect with the DCRF network and can give updates in future about Christian police work and other areas. Martin will also give an update on rural crime affecting church next time – with the key being prevention.

Speaking for many, Danny commented on how important the rural church has been in the last year to so many people. In his parish they were determined to get church open as soon as possible, and from the first service the normal numbers of people came back straightaway and people then came from other churches that weren't open. Social distancing was needed with maximum numbers – but it was very obvious how important the church was to everyone.

11 **Dates and themes of next meetings:**

Monday 2nd November, 10am-12 noon

12 **Closing Prayer led by Howard**