**MW AGM speech**

How wonderful to see such a gathering, and how disappointing that we cannot all be together in our usual AGM format. I know how much many of you enjoyed the annual get together, and from LRSN’s perspective we miss the opportunity not to catch up with you all. Thank you for taking the time to join us in our new format tonight, and thanks to Sophie, Alison Pratt and Alison Twiddy who have mastered the technology in their usual professional and unflappable style!

It has been absolutely imperative that, despite the upheaval, that LRSN kept a service that was visibly open for business. I would like to thank all of the PR team – staff and volunteers – who have worked so hard to keep the service alive and accessible with some really innovative promotional work. To the caseworkers, again staff and volunteers, who have responded to every call, and to the trustee board who has put in significant effort to help steer a steady path. I feel very privileged to lead such a strong trustee board and organisation, and I am sure that there are effective ways of working with online technology that we have learned that will continue to be put to good use once the pandemic is over.

We are as good as our people, whether that is staff, volunteers or wider partnerships, there has never been a greater need to grow to meet the need. There can be few farming businesses that have been left untouched by the bizarre weather of last year – too wet, too cold, too dry and too hot – farming’s love affair with the weather definitely took a turn for the worse! It is unusual to have so many different crops failing together – poor wheat and barley yields, virus yellows in our sugar beet, and OSR crops decimated by beetle – as one farmer put it, he was fortunate to have had a crop and a half last year and the other half this year…but some didn’t get the crop and a half last year. Many farms diversified and what a challenge that has been in Covid times with holiday cottages closed, soft play, farm parks and cafes out of action. The rural community has definitely not been immune from the stresses of the Covid lockdown. Brexit looming is just another worry to add to the mix with reducing single farm payments. When Alan Robson, our agricultural chaplain, formed LRSN 22 years ago, I don’t think that even he could have envisaged the scenario that we face today, with 160 families helped in the last year.

Our strategy is simple, we are equipping ourselves

* to be an accessible lifeline
* to respond to each and every call.
* To help those in the rural community to get ‘back on track together’, whatever the difficulties and however long that might take.

I would like to take a few moments to talk about the partnerships that are so important to our organisation. Firstly, from a financial perspective, we are immensely grateful to the organisations that maintain an interest in our work and have supported us financially. The amazing financial support that we have received has given us the confidence to get on with the job rather than worry about the financial hole from the many events that have been cancelled. Those organisations don’t just provide cash, they help train our staff and volunteers, promote our services, work with us on legal and financial aspects of our work and support in so many other ways. Thank you to all of you – I would particularly mention the Worth Waynflete Foundation that has been a steadfast friend of LRSN for so many years particularly giving us the confidence to make the step change to employ a ‘Health and Wellbeing Lead’ – how fortuitous has that appointment been. Well done, Gilly for all that she has achieved in her first year with us.

Gilly’s links into the NHS have enabled us to create effective working relationships with NHS services smoothing the path into any services that we need to access on behalf of clients. We have also extended our front-line partnership working through links with two professional counselling organisations, Fortis and Naomi Watkins counselling hub.

Another area of partnership front-line working that is about to grow significantly is agricultural chaplaincy. Our agricultural chaplain, Alan, is an indispensable part of the LRSN core. He recently described his chaplaincy ‘as setting the fire, so others can fan the flames’, and how successful he has been in nurturing projects and encouraging others to fan the flames. We are very grateful for the Methodist District who continue to support Alan’s chaplaincy, 20 years on. The agricultural chaplaincy appeal campaign designed to create a mechanism for the agricultural community to share in that support is nearing launch, and has received a major boost with the news that the Diocese are looking to recruit three part -time associate chaplains to work one day a week alongside Alan. There could not be a better time to extend chaplaincy services in terms of need in our community, and LRSN has pledged to help the associated chaplains through induction, training and mentoring to join forces with our caseworker team.

It is important that we continually evaluate our service. Value means different things to different people, and LRSN has been working with Rose Regeneration on a Defra-funded project to develop a mechanism to evaluate rural services not just in its narrow financial sense but recognising the importance of social, environmental and economic wellbeing across our communities. The term ‘Social value’ is gaining importance in terms of public funding with a requirement for a 10% weighting of social value to be applied from next January. As it gains wider use, it will become a tool to reflect what an organisation is achieving in a structured way against other organisations. The first results show LRSN returning over £11 for every £1 spent and we look forward to being able to share these with you in more detail in the coming months.

We have ambitious plans to further our partnership networks and extend our health screening service into new locations, but these will have to wait until it is safe to do so.

I would like to finish by recognising the amazing work done by Alison Twiddy in steering a steady ship through the turbulent waters of the last 12 months. So competent and caring in so many ways, the professional face of LRSN that glues our virtual community together, and always looking for new opportunities and new ways to improve what we do. Thank you, Alison, for another great year.

I also have one other very special person to mention. Recently described as Alison’s wingman and girl Friday, Sophie is stepping down after 10 years at the helm of our PR and administration. The title hasn’t done her justice. She has simply made the role her own and in doing so gaining a reputation for LRSN for first in class delivery which gives supporters, sponsors and anyone who works with her confidence of a fantastic outcome. As I was told last week ‘her dedication to getting things absolutely right is uncompromising!’. She has been a large part of the success of so many events – three Rural Charities Dinners, two Racedays, ten Golf Days, annual AGM’s and Charity auctions at venues around the county. Not to mention many smaller events. The LRSN newsletter and promotional material is the envy of many organisations and it is Sophie’s flare for the visual that has made the difference – the LRSN signpost, the stand for the farming conference, the Annual reports and so much more. In an administration role, she has kept us on track with her excellent minute taking and was the architect behind our successful Investors in Volunteers accreditation. Thank you, Sophie from all of us for all that you have done and, the really good news is that you are moving seamlessly onto the board as a new trustee, so welcome in your new role. We are all delighted that you are remaining part of the organisation, and welcome to Sarah Poucher joining the PR team.

We also sadly said goodbye to Tony Molyneux who retired from the board at our last meeting after 15 years. Tony had a huge input as treasurer in the early days, setting up LRSN as a Company ltd by guarantee and managing the accounts and insurances on a daily basis.

I feel very lucky to Chair such a strong board and also welcomed onto the board this year, Andy Hawes and Alex Godfrey. Andy is a retired parish priest and takes up the role left vacant by David Creasey, and has been hugely helpful in our chaplaincy discussions, Alex Godfrey who has taken a role as part of our Investment subgroup and looking after the insurances. Thank you to all the board for all the diversity of skills that you bring, and particularly too to my Vice-Chair, Matt Phillips who has brought enthusiasm and new thinking to the Board. It is privilege to chair such a well governed organisation that makes such a difference in our community.