

NOTE OF THE BEDFORDSHIRE RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM MEETING HELD AT SHUTTLEWORTH COLLEGE ON 8 FEBRUARY 2008

Attending

Alex Francis – Beds & Luton Economic Development Partnership
Kayleigh James – Experience Bedfordshire/ Beds County Council
Martin Towler
Janet Ridge – BRCC
Laurent Martial – SBDC
Sarah Hughes – Beds County Council, Economic Growth Group
Ann Lovesey – Beds Association of Town and Parish Councillors & Beds County Federation of WIs
Anthony Davison – BigBarn and Local Food Shop
John Thomas - Learning & Skills Council
Diane Budd – Business Link
Sandra Einon – Mid Beds District Council
Cllr John Scott – Beds County Council
Rachel Beadling – Bidwells
David Morgan – Beds & Cambs Rural Support Group
Jennie Webb – SBDC
Richard Woolnough – Greensand Trust
Andrew Pym – Country Land and Business Association
Revd Monica Robinson
Mark Smith CVS Mid and North Beds
Beni Wright – BRCC
Jane Markham – BRAF

1. Welcome

Alex Francis chaired and welcomed members and guests to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Matthew O'Brien, Jon Balaam, Graham Bellamy, Anita Lewis, Roger Greene, Paula Grayson, Susan Garbutt, Sarah Hughes, Tracey James, Rachel Carrington.

3. Notes of the 20 November 07 meeting and matters arising

The note was agreed as an accurate record.

Item 3 - Alex agreed to action re making the MORI report on Bedfordshire's image available.

4. Business planning – report from the steering group

Jane reported on the last Steering Group meeting on 18 January.

RSCP succession

Richard Woolnough, Mark Smith and Ann Lovesay joined the steering group for this item to look at how RSCP activities might be sustained after March 2008 when Defra funding will cease. The group explored a number of options e.g GAF 3, roof tax levy, Lottery, Landfill tax, but concluded there were no clear funding routes and certainly nothing in the near future. It was agreed that BRAF and the partners carrying out the activities would need to continue to try and influence to get priorities "mainstreamed".

Community-led planning Workshop

A meeting on 6 February had considered the need for a workshop to look at how community-led plans such as parish plans and GI plans fit with strategic planning.

5. Nominations for BRAF Steering Group

Alex Francis explained that Linda Willis and Anthony Goggin had stepped down from the Steering Group, and expressed thanks on behalf of BRAF members for their contributions. Members were asked to contact Jane if they were interested in sitting on the steering group.

6. Report from the East of England Rural Forum and nominations for BRAF representative to EERF.

Ann Lovesey reported on the 12 December EERF meeting. EERF has produced a suite of position papers covering Sustainable Farming and Food, water resources and planning. Following agreement on the papers produced, each paper will be used to influence Ministers and/or national policy, regional agencies etc. The annual conference is to be held on 5 March 2008, and the AGM on 12 March.

It had been agreed that there should be a representative from each of the County Associations of Town and Parish Councils instead of 3 for the region. The terms of reference for the steering group were also amended. There were workshops sessions on future EERF priorities.

Alex explained that Janet was stepping down as BRAF representative on EERF. It was important that BRAF maintained its presence, and anyone interested in being the BRAF representative should contact Jane by 15 February.

7. Update on RDPE Leader bid

Jane reported that following consideration of the initial expressions of interest by the regional panel, the Greensand Ridge Local Action Group had been invited to submit a full Local Development Strategy (LDS) by 14 March. Feedback from EEDA had been positive. The main points that needed to be addressed were around financial and administrative capacity. The main tasks ahead were demonstrating broad and extensive community consultation and increasing Local Action Group membership, increasing the focus of activities, strengthening the content to demonstrate sustainability. Open evenings and thematic workshops were being planned, along with a survey of farmers. Members were asked to consider how these could be publicised, and also to provide letters of support.

8. Future direction of BRAF

Jane introduced the paper that had been circulated on the future role and activities of BRAF. Following the end of RSCP funding in March, it would not be possible for BRCC to maintain the forum with all its current functions and a full time officer. It was therefore timely to review BRAF's role and identify priority activities. Members agreed in the discussion that BRAF had an important role to play in keeping a focus on rural issues against the backdrop of the growth agenda, and that BRAF had grown in identity and credibility. It provided a unique opportunity for the voluntary, statutory and business sectors to get together. BRAF had been successful in putting rural-proofing on the agenda and there was a danger it would fall off again without BRAF to take it forward.

It was agreed that other opportunities for funding and raising income should be explored. Also, Jane would send prepare a survey of members to try to identify priority activities.

9. Year of Food and Farming update

David Morgan reported on the huge response from schools – Anne-Marie Hamilton was now being contacted by 2-3 schools a day. It was encouraging that most were looking for more long term involvement than the current year. Anne-Marie is now looking to recruit more farmers. Tastes of Bedfordshire was also involved. An initial launch had been held on 20 February at Shuttleworth lambing day, and the Young Farmers rally on 17 May will be badged for YOFF. Members were asked to let Anne-Marie or Jane know of any suitable events that might be badged as YOFF.

10. Beds and Luton Tourism Strategy

Alex set out the rationale for the strategy, and how the target of 50k additional jobs in the Joint Economic Development Strategy included a target of 5,000 jobs in the tourism sector. Though the tourism market had increased in volume, actual expenditure by visitors was static or even declining. Much of the existing market consisted of friends and relatives, business and day visits. With EEDA funding, the strategy had been developed by the Strategic Tourism Advisory Group. Commercial partners had been directly engaged by involvement on the STAG, which was chaired by Chris Webster of Woburn Safari Park, and their experience had been invaluable. LSC funding had also been obtained. Kayleigh James gave a demonstration of the new Experience Bedfordshire website, and explained the marketing campaign for it. The strategy also included research on business support needs and barriers for tourism business, ranging from small scale attractions to the major attractions.

11. Hidden Britain Centres – community led tourism

Beni Wright explained how the national Hidden Britain initiative had been started against the background of the 2001 foot and mouth epidemic. In Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, the project aimed to develop 10 local hidden Britain centres. She outlined the process involved in setting these up and involving the communities, and how it could take some time for villages to view the prospect of visitors as a positive thing. She reported on progress on three Hertfordshire projects, and the 5 Bedfordshire projects, most of which were based round clusters of villages – Riversmeet, Woburn, Wixamtree, the North Beds Wolds, and the Marston Vale Line, and Hidden Potton. The main issues were -

- Takes time to get action plans done and bids written
- National website has had problems
- Need active volunteers to develop website locally
- Rural areas difficult to get people involved to start with
- Rural areas, need to raise awareness of potential benefits
- Slow to get groups constituted
- Main issue overall is time element
- Officer support had been vital.

However, the benefits had been seen in terms of community cohesion, regeneration (it supports village services and local businesses), extra profile for Tastes of Beds & local foods, both production and retail, it improves healthy living through walks and local interest, and increases network and partnership working. Outcomes to date included over 40 new walks created or rediscovered to be promoted and linked to Lets Go, over £41,000 brought in to Hertfordshire, over £60,000 for applications in Bedfordshire to promote village life.

12. Farm diversification into tourism

Martin Towler of Scald End Farm, Thurleigh talked about his experience of diversifying into tourism and other activities. Martin reflected on the changes in the farming industry and influences well beyond the control of the small farmer. Industry had lost marketing skills and these now needed to be re-built. Farmers now had to look outside traditional farming for income. He had taken over the family farm four years ago. It had already had holiday lets. He had since obtained planning permission for a school for rural skills, which would encompass sessions on cooking, gardening, growing and would make the links from production right through to eating. It was important that the public should see the reality of where food comes from. He was hoping to shortly receive planning permission for a farm shop, which would only sell produce from within a 25 mile radius. He had surveyed his customers who buy his poultry about what they would want from a farm shop. Only 2 had wanted cheap food, one third wanted organic, but the vast majority simply wanted the assurance of knowing the provenance of the food.

He also had plans for a preparation room e.g. for production of local pickles, to add value to produce and employ local people. He also hoped to develop a tea room. Following closure of the village post office last July, there were plans to provide post office facilities in the farm shop. The heritage of buildings needed to be respected, but there was a tension between providing a commercially viable future for farm buildings and and planning restrictions. The farm would also link in with other tourism

attractions and local walks. Looking ahead to rising prices of fossil fuels and fuel shortages, the farm would be converting to organic methods this year so that inputs such as fertilisers were reduced. In conclusion he felt that British agriculture had arrived at a crossroads, and that marketing, sustainability and getting the public onto farms were key.

13. Soapbox

Anthony Davison said that there were now 7500 producers nationwide on the Big Barn website and they were teaming up with other websites e.g. BBC Good Food and Countryfile sites. The next step was to make it easier to buy local food and an on-line shop with local delivery had been set up – Localfoodshop <http://www.localfoodshop.co.uk/> They were also working to get producers and retailers to team up so that a wide range of local produce could be delivered to customers in one go. – for example in Ashwell, the butcher, baker and grocer had grouped together. The vision was that any local shop could team up with farmers locally so that each community had a local on-line supply. Despite a feature on Radio 4, only a very low level of orders had been placed so far, and he would welcome feedback from BRAF members on what they would like to see.

14. AOB

Mid Beds Credit Union - Mark Smith reported that Mid Beds District Council had agreed to fund a development officer, to be employed by Bedford Credit Union.

Centerparcs – Mark Smith had attended the meeting of stakeholders the previous day. Opening was being planned for late 2010, dependent on getting the necessary infrastructure in place i.e Millbrook and Steppingly roundabouts later this year. Centerparcs would be producing a newsletter to keep stakeholders informed of progress.

CRED - Sandra Einon said that following the climate change conferences held by Mid Beds LSP and BRAF last year, Mid Beds were working to make progress, particularly on a local level. The Mid Beds management team had agreed £10k funding towards the development of a local CRed partnership and website, being developed by Sarah Williams of Groundwork. CRed encourages individuals to make pledges to save carbon, captures the savings, and provides practical support. They would be looking to get town and parish councils involved.

15. Date of next meeting

13 May.