

NOTES OF THE BEDFORDSHIRE RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM MEETING HELD AT SHUTTLEWORTH COLLEGE ON 6 SEPTEMBER 2006

Attending

David Morgan	Beds & Cambs Rural Support Group
Donna Wilkinson	South Beds District Council
Stephen Rice	Bidwells
Alex Francis	Beds & Luton Economic Development Partnership
John Thomas	Learning & Skills Council, Beds & Luton
Ann Collett-White	Campaign to Protect Rural England
Richard Woolnough	Greensand Trust
Janet Ridge	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Ann Lovesey	Beds Association of Town and Parish Councils & County Federation of WIs
Monica Robinson	Agricultural Chaplain
Rachel Carrington	National Farmers Union
Diane Budd	Rural Gateway
Suzanne Roast	Essex Rural Communities Council
Rachel Beadling	Bidwells
Paul Vann	Beds County Council
Helen Lazarus	Beds County Council
Sarah Hughes	Beds County Council
Sandy Cruickshank	GO East
Simon Peart	Bedford Borough Council
Susan Garbutt	Bedford Borough Council
Anthony Goggin	Agricultural Development in the Eastern Region/ Shuttleworth College
David Bevan	Beds County Council
Matthew O'Brien	Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group
Jane Markham	BRAF Coordinator

1. Welcome

Anthony Goggin chaired, and welcomed members and guests to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Apologies had been received from:

Anne-Marie Hamilton, Paula Grayson, Richard Inman, Mark Smith, Jon Balaam, Anthony Davison, Wendy Anderson-Welch, Tim Isaac, Vivien Cannon

3. Notes and matters arising from May meeting

The notes of the May meeting were formally agreed.

Matters arising

Rural Development Programme

Jane M reported that a draft Regional Implementation Plan for the new Rural Development Programme for England had been submitted to Defra on 21 July, and was available on the East of England Rural Forum website. EERF was inviting feedback on the draft, which was a working document and likely to evolve further. JM said that it would be helpful if any feedback by members could be copied to her for information.

BRAF Website

Sarah Hughes asked if reports on the use of the website could be circulated. **Action: Jane M.**

4. Business Planning

Jane M ran through the note of the Steering Group meeting of 7 June which had been circulated in advance of the meeting. On the Rural Social & Communities Programme, GO East had subsequently written to LAA leads to confirm that this funding would be pooled with the LAA next year and to reply by end September with proposals of how this would be done. Alex Francis provided an update on the summits that were being held on the Investing in Communities programme and issuing of contracts for the approved activities.

5-7. Focus on Farm Diversification

Paul Vann chaired this session which opened with “bite size” presentations. Rachel Carrington spoke about the decline in total income from farming, farm restructuring and other factors leading to more farmers looking to diversify. Susan Garbutt gave the planners perspective, explaining the complications of the new planning system and how local policies needed to reflect national and regional policies. She set out the current planning policies relevant to farm diversification. Sandy Cruickshank gave a regional overview of the Regional Rural Delivery Framework, the regional implementation plan for the Rural Development Programme for England, and described the statutory planning role that GO East has with respect to the Local Development Framework.

(Copies of the full powerpoint presentations have been put on the BRAF website <http://www.braf.org.uk/BRAF.html>)

Unfortunately Nick Burman of the Adventure Gourmet Cookery School had been unable to attend the meeting to give a presentation on his diversification experience as planned. **Action JM to circulate information about the school.**

Stephen Rice provided a recap on the main points of the work Bidwells had carried out on the potential for diversification of farm buildings in Bedfordshire, and the main barriers in terms of access to business and planning advice, suitable infrastructure, restrictive tenancy agreements and how tenants can raise loans to enable them to diversify.

The following points came up in the subsequent discussions:

- What constitutes diversification – conversion to residential could be viewed as asset stripping; Not necessary though that the farmer carries out the new activity - in many cases, it might be more advisable for the farmer to rent out buildings/land for someone else to carry out the non-farming activity but enabling the farmer to stay in farming.
- Free planning advice is available through the Planning Advisory Services. Early contact with planners is vital. Planners are only part of the chain – highways, landscape and historic buildings officers also needed to be involved;
- Scope for planners to refer farmers to Rural Gateway for advice since success of a planning application will also depend on there being a good business case.
- The economic agenda had driven the Bidwells study, but there was a need to view this against other agendas too e.g. heritage, environmental, landscape, historic buildings. Lower value conversions such as storage might be desirable for some historic buildings since there was generally less damage to the building. English Heritage had recently published advice.
- Significant differences existed between owner-occupied farms and the much more limited opportunities that tenant farmers have to diversify. New tenancy legislation did not now go as far as had been expected in alleviating these problems. Landlords could still withhold consent for diversification.
- Difference between high and low value activities. E.g. good quality rural offices 1 person/100 sq feet. Commonly 5-8000 sq feet could support employment of up to 80 people. Workshops were lower density, with 2-300sq feet per workshop user. Storage uses were low volume but easier because facilities such as toilets were not needed.

- The Bidwells study had found that there far fewer sites with really good potential than originally thought. Many had already been converted to residential or some other use in the 1990s.
- There was some scope for development of other rural buildings e.g. community buildings, former schools – though the latter might be subject to legal charges retaining them for educational uses.

Paul Vann ran through the action points suggested in a paper tabled by Bedfordshire County Council in advance of the meeting (“Initial Response to Recommendations” circulated on 5 September). The meeting agreed the research was very useful. It was agreed that a small subgroup should be set up to consider potential actions to take forward the research on the use of redundant farm buildings and how good practice can be promoted/demonstrated, and it was proposed the Beds County Council should lead on this. **Action: All – please let Jane M know by 22 September if you want to be on the group, and if you have any thoughts about who should lead.**

8. Soapbox

This is an opportunity for forum members to air issues with a strict time limit on each slot of 3 minutes. Although there is no discussion of the issue, the forum then agrees whether or not the issue should be taken forward as an agenda item for a future meeting

Richard Woolnough – “Community Consultation: fact or fiction”

Government guidance for Community Plans talked about putting people at the heart of partnership working and wide local ownership. BRAF had rural-proofed the community plans – what improvements had there been? Was it a good time for BRAF to assess how good we are at partnership working.

It was agreed this should be taken forward at a future meeting, possibly a themed meeting involving people from parish plan groups, and looking at how parish plans feed in e.g. to the Local Area Agreement. **Action: Jane M to put on future agenda.**

9. East of England Rural Forum

Janet Ridge reported that the next regional forum, and next meeting with Ministers, would be on Access to Services. **Action: All are invited to feed in any comments to Janet Ridge. Janet to feed in concerns re end of subsidy for rural post offices. Jane M to circulate draft letter about concerns for future of post offices.**

10. Rural Priorities for the Local Area Agreement

Janet Ridge explained that it had been necessary to cancel the workshop that had been scheduled to take place after the main BRAF meeting. She described the proposed priorities for development in the refresh of the LAA that had been set out in the paper Jane had circulated on 30 August - parish plans, local democracy, transport, healthy living agenda (possibly local foods). **Action: All – any comments on these proposals to Jane by 22 September please.**

11. Any other business

Market Towns Jane M said that a meeting was being set up on 14 September to look at current regional support for market towns and the scope to improve access by Bedfordshire market towns to this.

12. Date of next meeting Monday 20 November 2006. Dates for 2007 would be circulated **Action: Jane M**