

NOTES OF THE BEDFORDSHIRE RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM MEETING HELD AT SHUTTLEWORTH COLLEGE ON THURSDAY 8 SEPTEMBER 2005

Attending

Linda Willis – Beds Heartlands Primary Care Trust
David Quin - Church of England
Stephen Halton – North Chilterns Trust
Hannah Fox – GO East (Rural team)
Paul Vann – Beds County Council
Richard Woolnough – Greensand Trust
Caroline Henman – GO East (Community Development)
Janet Ridge – Beds Rural Communities Charity
Ann Lovesey – Beds Association of Town and Parish Councils
Ed Burnett – Beds County Council Countryside Access Service
Anthony Davison – BigBarn Ltd
Alex Francis - Beds & Luton Economic Development Partnership
Zulf Awan – South Bedfordshire District Council
Anne-Marie Hamilton - Beds County Training Ltd
Anthony Goggin – Agricultural Development in the Eastern Region
Jane Markham – BRAF Coordinator

1. Welcome

Linda Willis chaired, and welcomed members to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Apologies had been received from: Paula Grayson, David Morgan, Guy Lambourne, John Gelder, Mark Smith, Ann Collett-White, Rachel Carrington, Hemant Mistry.

3. Notes and matters arising from May meeting

The notes of the May meeting were formally agreed, subject to minor amendments to the list of attendees and the Tastes of Bedfordshire item. Jane M would circulate the revised notes.

Matters arising

(i) Hidden Britain Centres project

David Quin said that progress was being made on developing this project, which now included Moggerhanger Park as well as the previously identified locations. The project was expected to go live in Spring 2006.

(ii) Bid for National Institute for Research into Aquatic Habitats (NIRAH)

Paul Vann reported that negotiations were ongoing.

(iii) Bedfordshire Police Authority Budget

Jane M had written to the police authority to seek information on contacts and boundaries and a reply was awaited.

(iv) ECOTEC study on the range and scope of Bedfordshire's rural economy

Anthony Goggin reported that an event to disseminate the results of the research was being arranged for 15 November at Shuttleworth. Ecotec would present key findings, then workshops would explore issues relating to learning and skills, social enterprises, business advice, and the future structural development of Bedfordshire.

4. Defra Rural Social and Communities Programme (RSCP)

Caroline Henman gave a presentation on this two year programme. The aims of the programme were three-tiered:

- improving opportunities for socially excluded *individuals*;
- building the ability of rural *communities* to shape their own future;
- developing the voluntary and community and town and parish council *sectors* to help this happen.

£8 million pounds was being made available nationally, and Defra was currently consulting on proposals for the programme. In the East of England, sub-regional allocations were expected to range from £100k-£200k. Based on the preferred funding formula, it was anticipated Bedfordshire would receive £156k each year. In addition, Defra was making some funding available for the development by sub-regional partnerships of business cases for proposed activities under the programme. One of the key objectives of the programme was to get more effective voluntary and community sector voices in strategic decision making processes, and this was why it was proposed that funding would come under the Local Area Agreement.

Jane M outlined the key points of the draft consultation response she was proposing to send to Defra (and which had been circulated to BRAF members on 31 August). The meeting discussed the concerns that had been flagged up in the draft response, in particular the tight timetable and complexity of the process for a relatively small amount of funding, and the problem of how RSCP could mesh with the high level targets of the Local Area Agreement. It was noted that the programme would be replacing current Countryside Agency funding for Rural Housing Enabler, Parish Plans and Social Exclusion. Funding for the Rural Transport Partnership was also due to be discontinued by EEDA. It was recommended that links needed to be made at a regional level with the Investing in Communities programme.

It was agreed that BRAF should position itself to be the sub-regional partnership to draw up the business case for RSCP, but given that Rural Renaissance funding for BRAF was due to end in March 2006, this was on the proviso that funding for BRAF should be included in the business case. It was agreed that the development of the business case should be taken forward by the steering group members with the addition of Anthony Davison. **Action – Jane M to put in a bid for resources for preparing the business case.**

5. Update on Investing in Communities

Alex Francis reported that the report and analysis of the evidence base by consultants OCSI was near to completion. There was also a six page summary paper on key barriers, and transport figured strongly as a barrier. The report would be considered by a joint meeting of the IIC Working Groups on 12 September. The first draft of the business plan had to be sent to EEDA by the end of the month. It was proposed to carry out some further consultation to help identify interventions for

the business plan. The full business plan would be in place by April 2006, although approval of some early interventions might be possible from January. EEDA has given a clear message that the plan would have to be rural-proofed. In the first instance this would be done by Chris Allen at EEDA, but more local rural-proofing might be needed and input from BRAF would be welcome. **Action: Alex to circulate the OCSI summary document.**

6. Business Planning – report from Steering Group

Janet Ridge ran through the note of the Steering Group meeting on 11 July (circulated 31 August).

Report on Rural Renaissance funding

Jane M highlighted that there was a capital underspend of around £30k following the withdrawal of one project. The reserve projects from the business plan were being approached in the first instance.

Interim Parish Plans

A panel of BRAF members was being set up to consider parish plan applications. BRCC would be holding an evening meeting on 22 September for parishes to promote parish plans and advise them of the availability of this funding.

7. Report from East of England Rural Forum

Janet Ridge reported on the EERF meeting held on 15 July and explained the restructuring of the forum. She had been nominated back on to EERF as the BRAF representative. Councillor Pat Olney was the nominated representative of Beds Rural Communities Charity. There would also be a Local Government Association representative for Bedfordshire. Ann Lovesey was the representative for BENSCH, the Regional Association of Town and Parish Councils. A meeting had been held between the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire representatives in July to explore the scope for linking up over common issues and having a stronger voice for this part of the region by working together.

Janet explained the role of the forum would be to monitor and challenge delivery agencies and it would not have a delivery role. Two subgroups – on learning and skills, and rural housing – had been inherited, and a third was being started on market towns. There would no longer be a national forum; instead there would be regular meetings between the chairs of the regional forums and the Minister. The next meeting would be on 11 October and food, farming and skills would be on the agenda. The chair of EERF was keen that county forums should feed points in to him for these meetings, and members were asked to let Janet know of any food and farming issues they wanted raising. **Action: All**

There was a new slot at EERF meetings, the “Members Soap Box”, which was an opportunity for members to speak for three minutes to raise issues of importance to their constituencies. There would be no discussion of the issues, but the forum would agree whether or not the issues should be taken forward as an agenda item for a future meeting. Janet had used this slot to raise concerns about Rural Renaissance funding being mainstreamed into Investing in Communities, and the role of EERF in ensuring sub-regional business plans are rural proofed. EERF had agreed this should go on the agenda of the next meeting on 23 September. She invited members to let her have key points of any issues they wanted raising. **Action: All. Paul Vann** said he would provide points on the problems of short term

funding for rural transport . **Anne-Marie Hamilton** raised the issue of cross-border services.

8. Report back from BRAF meeting in July on East of England Plan

Jane M said that the Examination in Public for the East of England Plan would start in November. The consultation had received over 21,500 responses. BRAF had been invited to participate in Matter 8M on Bedfordshire outside the Milton Keynes South Midlands Sub-Region (MKSM), and an extra BRAF meeting had been held in July to consider key points for inclusion in the next written submission. It had been agreed BRAF should especially bring out needs for social infrastructure, green infrastructure the need to address existing deficits, and to map the gaps in rural policies between the East of England Plan and MKSM.

9. Jobs in Ancient Woodlands study

Richard Woolnough set out the decline in the importance in woodland products and that lack of recent management meant that the woodlands represent a low quality resource at present. Work in the woodlands was increasingly carried out for the purposes of conservation, recreation or game management rather than wood products. The growing number of muntjac deer was a major problem.

The possibilities for local uses and production of woodland products had potential to add to Bedfordshire's economy and creation of jobs. However there was a danger that if development of the resource was purely driven by economics not enough attention would be paid to conservation. He explained the various markets that had been looked at in the study – coppice products and charcoal, firewood, timber, biomass and deer. The new Woodland Grant Scheme was vital and it was hoped to employ a full-time adviser to help uptake by woodland owners. Work was also being done to raise awareness of the benefits of woodland management for biodiversity and recreation and to encourage people to use products from their local woodlands.

10. Any other business

(i) Market towns funding Alex Francis informed members that following the end of the Market Towns Initiative, EEDA were making Investing in Communities funding available to assist the development of market town partnerships and acquisition of capital assets by partnerships.

(ii) Bedford Development Framework It was agreed Jane should submit the consultation response as drafted.

(iii) SQW report on rural delivery Hannah Fox reported that the final report of this research would be available imminently.

11. Date of next meeting

Wednesday 16 November, Shuttleworth College.