

NOTES OF THE BEDFORDSHIRE RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM MEETING HELD AT SHUTTLEWORTH COLLEGE ON FRIDAY 10 FEBRUARY 2006

Attending

Paul Vann	Bedfordshire County Council
Janet Ridge	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
David Morgan	Beds & Cambs Rural Support Group
Henry Blucher	South Bedfordshire District Council
Zulf Awan	South Bedfordshire District Council
Vivien Cannon	South Bedfordshire District Council
Ann Lovesey	Beds Association of Town and Parish Councils
Mick Carr	GO East (Rural team)
Anne-Marie Hamilton	Beds County Training Ltd
Alex Francis	Beds & Luton Economic Development Partnership
Martin Trinder	North Beds Council for Voluntary Service
Peter Thomas	Bedfordshire Police
Linda Willis	Beds Heartlands Primary Care Trust
Jon Balaam	Beds County Council – Countryside Access Service
Richard Woolnough	Greensand Trust
Ann Collett-White	Campaign to Protect Rural England
Susan Garbutt	Bedford Borough Council
Anthony Davison	Big Barn Ltd
Nick Saltmarsh	East Anglia Food Links
Jane Markham	BRAF Coordinator

1. Welcome

Paul Vann chaired, and welcomed members to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Apologies had been received from: Paula Grayson, Hemant Mistry, Sarah Prentice, Sarah Mardling, Matthew O'Brien, John Gelder, Mark Smith.

3. Notes and matters arising from November meeting

The notes of the November meeting were formally agreed.

Matters arising

(i) Hidden Britain Centres project

Janet Ridge reported that the application for funding for a project officer for Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire had been put to the Defra panel in January, but had been deferred. It would be taken back to the panel on 30 March.

(ii) Rural Gateway

It was noted that the Rural Gateway (successor to BRBS) was now up and running, and discussions were underway with Cambridgeshire about how cross border issues would be covered.

4. A vision for Bedfordshire's Green Infrastructure (GI)

Jon Balaam, Bedfordshire County Council, gave a presentation on the work that had been carried out by the Green Infrastructure Consortium and the production of a GI plan, which had been funded in part through BRAF. The GI Consortium was a multi-agency partnership set up in late 2003. In the context of the Milton Keynes Sub Regional Strategy and East of England Spatial Strategy, the Consortium was urging for GI to be accorded as much importance as other infrastructure needs. Providing for GI presented environmental opportunities, maintaining and enhancing biodiversity, economic and employment

opportunities and social sustainability. The Consortium was producing a GI Plan for Bedfordshire and Luton which looked at and analysed needs in terms of landscape character assessment, historic character assessment, biodiversity character assessment, access and green space. It would be an evolving plan used to facilitate strategic planning and to inform Local Development Frameworks and other plans. The GI Plan would also be a tool to secure more resources for GI. The next step would be to produce more local “bottom up” GI plans.

It was noted in the discussion that it was important to engage with private landowners and that there had been liaison already with NFU through Bedfordshire Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG).

5. Update from Bedfordshire Police

Sergeant Peter Thomas, Community and Partnerships Officer, Bedfordshire Police explained how the force was facing probably the biggest change in thirty years under the Government plans for restructuring police forces. The favoured proposal was for merger between Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Cambridge forces. There was potential for better infrastructure and sharing resources and intelligence.

On the Ringmaster system, there was still work to be done to expand its coverage.

Discussion raised the concerns of rural communities where there is a feeling of vulnerability but insufficient visible policing which is an important deterrent. There was concern that amalgamation would lead to thinner coverage in rural areas. Whilst the number of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) was expected to increase significantly over the next couple of years, it had yet to be seen how many would be located in rural areas. There were also practical problems arising from PCSOs not having transport to get to villages.

6. Defra Rural Social & Communities Programme

Jane Markham reported on the feedback from GO East on the draft business plan that had been submitted on 1 December. The Steering Group had met on 23 January, along with John Gelder on behalf of the Change Up Consortium, to consider the draft business case in light of GO East’s comments, and to rigorously prioritise the proposed activities. The plan had been streamlined to five areas from the original seven.

Surprise was expressed that the proposal for funding support for BRAF had not yet been accepted by GO East. Beds County Training and Beds & Cambs Rural Support Group emphasised that the value and real achievements of BRAF needed to be recorded and acknowledged. All agreed the need to press for the inclusion of support for BRAF as an activity in the RSCP business case.

7. Investing in Communities

Alex Francis reported that the Beds & Luton IIC business plan was being held up in the region as an exemplar for establishing the evidence base and identifying the needs of the area. Provisional approval had been given for around £4m for 2006/7 to develop three main areas of work:

- Work Limiting Illness
- Transition from School to Employment
- Adult Skills and Training (post 19 year olds. EEDA are also encouraging looking at post 55 upto 65 year olds). This activity was being lead by the Learning Partnership and was very sector-focused – including construction, care sector, green infrastructure and tourism. There might be opportunities for capital funding to set up vocational training hubs.

It was hoped that the first two areas would be up and running by the beginning of the financial year. A further stakeholder workshop was to be held on 15 March.

Business support and support for social enterprises had also been identified as intervention areas. These areas were expected to feature more in the next version of the business plan covering 2007-2009; work was due to start on this in June.

8. Business Planning – report from Steering Group

(i) Rural Renaissance funding.

Jane Markham reported that the Moggerhanger Park (exhibition area improvements) and Green Infrastructure Plan projects had been approved since the last BRAF meeting. These were being funded from the capital money which had originally been allocated to the Colmworth Nursery project (which had been withdrawn). A potential revenue underspend of around £20k was flagged up. Existing projects were being approached, but there might still be around £10k available. If members had any new proposals they should let her know urgently.

(ii) Interim Parish Plan funding

Jane reported that the BRAF panel consisted of Ann Lovesey (BATPC), Zulf Awan (SBDC), Susan Garbutt (Bedford Borough), Trevor Saunders (MBDC) and Ed Burnett (Beds CC). The first round of applications had resulted in grants being approved for Felmersham and Radwell, Harlington, Roxton and Stevington. The panel was due to meet again on 17 February, and applications had been received from Cranfield, Heath and Reach, Thurleigh, Northill, Pertenhall and Swineshead, Aspley Guise and Willington.

9. Report from East of England Rural Forum

Ann Lovesey reported that there was to be a cross regional conference on 1 March on Learning and Skills, organised by EERF with the East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum. The December forum meeting had included a presentation on climate change, mostly focusing on coastline changes, and one on the Regional Health Strategy. The afternoon had comprised the launch of the Rural Gateway.

10. Bedfordshire Heartlands Rural Food Access Project

Nick Saltmarsh, East Anglian Food Links (EAFL) gave a presentation on this project, which had received funding via BRAF. EAFL had managed the project on behalf of Bedfordshire Heartlands PCT. He explained that previous food access work had mainly been done in urban areas. Rural areas had a distinct set of problems.

Nick set out the four main project components:

- **Initial research** mapping the availability of healthy affordable food, and identifying existing community work. The report was available on the EAFL website.
- **Community research** to identify and engage 12 communities; 15 groups had in fact engaged with the project, including mums and tots, travellers, youth groups, residents groups. The project had found that communities generally already had a clear idea of what activities were wanted.
- **Community-led interventions**, devised and implemented by each community, supported by the project worker and with assistance with start-up costs. Examples included cooking workshops, educational activities, a community cafe, community shops, fruit and veg schemes. Most interventions looked likely to be sustained beyond the end of the project.
- **Involvement of local producers** where appropriate. BigBarn had been a project partner and there had been good links with Tastes of Bedfordshire project. There had been few opportunities however to involve local producers in the interventions. Also existing local shops had been reluctant to get involved, although many rural shops were in desperate need of support. Nevertheless, the Tastes of Bedfordshire meat cooperative was talking to Kensworth and Hockliffe community groups about the supply of locally produced meat to extend their fruit and veg schemes.

Some key lessons were:

In terms of engagement of communities, the timescale of the project meant that using existing groups with strong active leaders was critical.

The Community Development Worker had been fundamental to enabling much of the work to be done in a short time and to the success of the groups.

Support for local producers was best focused through Tastes of Bedfordshire and BigBarn rather than bolted on to this community work.

There was still a case for detailed research into the food access issues and in particular mapping small and local pockets of deprivation – a critical issue in rural food access.

11. Any Other Business

Richard Woolnough asked if BRAF was proposing to provide a consultation response to “Local Strategic Partnerships – Shaping their Future”. It was agreed that BRAF should do so, and members were asked to feed their views to Jane. **Action: all**

12. Date of next meeting

9.30 on Tuesday 16 May at Shuttleworth.