

NOTES OF THE BEDFORDSHIRE RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM MEETING HELD AT SHUTTLEWORTH COLLEGE ON TUESDAY 16 MAY 2006

Attending

Janet Ridge	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Jon Balaam	Beds County Council – Countryside Access Service
Sarah Hughes	Beds County Council
Liz Wade	Beds County Council
Richard Inman	Government Office for the East of England
Ann Collett-White	Campaign to Protect Rural England
Anthony Goggin	Agricultural Development in the Eastern Region/ Shuttleworth College
Richard Woolnough	Greensand Trust
Ann Lovesey	Beds Association of Town and Parish Councils & County Federation of WIs
David Morgan	Beds & Cambs Rural Support Group
Diane Budd	Rural Gateway
Anthony Davison	Big Barn Ltd
Mark Smith	Mid Beds Council for Voluntary Service
John Gelder	Voluntary & Community Action South Beds
Jon Billington	Beds & Luton Economic Development Partnership
Jane Markham	BRAF Coordinator

Guests

Gill Eden	Beds County Council
Steven Rice	Bidwells
Rosie Fraser	Bidwells
Rachel Beadling	Bidwells
Sean Crawford	East of England Development Agency
David Brewer	Beds County Council

1. Welcome

Janet Ridge chaired, and welcomed members and guests to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Apologies had been received from: Alex Francis, Anne Marie Hamilton, Paula Grayson, Revd Monica Robinson, Linda Willis, Martin Trinder, Matthew O'Brien, Vivien Cannon.

3. Notes and matters arising from February meeting

The notes of the February meeting were formally agreed, subject to the following corrections:

- Item 6, paragraph 2 – the minutes referred incorrectly to EEDA and should refer instead to GO East.
- The final two agenda items were incorrectly numbered (there were two item 10s).

Matters arising

Hidden Britain Centres project

Janet Ridge reported that the application for funding for a project officer to develop Hidden Britain centres across Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire had just been agreed.

Green Infrastructure Plan

Jon Balaam said that the GI plan was undergoing final drafting changes and was expected to be published in June. He would bring copies to the next BRAF meeting.

LSP consultation

Jane Markham confirmed that a BRAF response had been submitted to the consultation "Local Strategic Partnerships – Shaping Their Future".

4. Rural Development Programme (RDPE)

Sean Crawford, East of England Development Agency (EEDA), explained that the proposals for the Rural Development Programme for England originated from the EU Rural Development Regulation. Defra was consulting on how the regulation should be translated into a national framework. In turn, EEDA was working with Natural England and the Forestry Commission to develop a regional implementation plan. A number of consultation meetings had been held around the region. The programme was organised around three axes (breakdown of funding shown):

Axis 1 – improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector (10%)

Axis 2 – improving the environment and countryside (80%)

Axis 3 – the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy (10%)

A minimum of 5% of the funding across the axes would be reserved for LEADER-style approach – partnership-based proposals for investment across the axes in specific geographic areas. Delivery would be through existing partnerships e.g. Investing in Communities, Market Town Partnerships, RSCP partnerships or rural forums. There would not be a restriction on the number of partnerships that could be involved.

Overall, the level of regional funding was expected to be £20-25million/year, meaning there would be £3-4.5million for axis 3.

Seven themes were proposed for the Regional Implementation Plan. Themes 1-3 focused on land-based industries; 4-6 were environmental; and 7 related to basic services for rural communities.

The relatively low level of funding for the socio-economic parts of the programme meant that they would have to be carefully focused to get maximum impact, and EEDA was proposing to support fewer, larger projects. Region-wide projects (e.g. wood fuel) might nevertheless involve local sub-projects feeding in to them.

Three facilitators would be employed by EEDA to help applicant bodies pull applications together and conceive projects.

Consultation on the regional implementation plan was due to close on 19 May, and consultation on the national plan on 22 May. EEDA was due to send draft proposals on the themes and rough funding breakdown of the former to Defra by the end of May, with a view to working up a final version of the regional plan by 20 July. The national plan would then be submitted to the EU in September for approval, with the aim of the programme being rolled out in January 2007.

Several members expressed concerns about how the voluntary and community sector could be involved in the RDPE. Payments in arrears were an obstacle to those organisations without an asset base or large cash reserves, and the need to explore avenues to enable up-front payments was emphasised. It was noted that the emphasis was on socio-economic more than social/community objectives. It was also asked how strategic the programme could be if the majority of funding would be through direct applications to EEDA as opposed to the LEADER approach.

Richard Woolnough said that the report of the Jobs in Ancient Woodlands project, funded by BRAF, had been forwarded and recommended to the Forestry Commission regionally and was relevant to development of wood-fuel projects.

It was agreed that BRAF should comment on the Regional Implementation Plan based on the morning's discussions. **Action: Jane M**

5. Business Planning

Jane Markham gave a report on the steering group meeting that had been held on 2 May, and ran through the papers that had been circulated to BRAF reporting on the outcome of Rural Renaissance and Interim Parish Plan funding. The Steering Group had also discussed the Rural Development Programme, and Defra's Rural Social and Community Programme. The RSCP business case had now been approved although there were some points in the offer letter that required clarification. She would be writing to lead organisations for each activity as soon as possible. There had been some discussion of the link to the Local Area Agreement and concerns about pooling RSCP in year 2, although there was a possibility that RSCP could be passported over to BRAF. It had also been suggested that the BRAF meetings should include a "Soapbox" slot, in line with the EERF.

David Morgan asked that thanks for Jane's work on obtaining agreement on the RSCP should be recorded in the minutes.

6. Report from East of England Rural Forum (EERF)

Ann Lovesey reported on the meeting held on 22 March at Newmarket. A report had been given from the three sub-groups, learning and skills, housing and market towns. The housing report had noted the need for affordable rural housing to enable people to work in the countryside. The learning and skills report showed concerns about the accessibility of learning for rural communities – this was not just a matter of public transport. There was a need for more stable funding arrangements, and for the diversity of skills from all ages and cultures to be considered. On market towns, the need for research to determine the economic outlook had been flagged up.

The EERF Chairman had been to meetings with the Defra Minister to discuss proposed rules and functions of the rural forums.

There had been a presentation for the Commission for Rural Communities, which would be a national body without a regional presence. It was hoped that EERF would be able to work effectively with the CRC. Mike Barnes from GO East had spoken about the Rural Strategy 2004 and the need to identify rural pockets of deprivation. Delivery need to be appropriate to the level of need, with efficient deployment of resources. There had been a discussion on the role of EERF in rural proofing, lobbying and advising and responding to consultations, and the need for two-way communication.

The afternoon was focussed on the Rural Development Programme for England 2007-13, with presentations from Defra and GO East, followed by workshops.

Richard Inman confirmed the next meeting would be on 8 June at Chilford Hall, and the theme would be market towns.

7. BRAF Website

Jane M gave a demonstration of the new website and invited members to provide any comments on the site.

8. Investing in Communities

Jon Billington recapped on the three main areas being funded under this year's business plan (Work Limiting Illness, Adult Skills and the Transition between schools and employment) and the two further areas being developed (Social Enterprise, and Children and Education). Stakeholder meetings were being held on these two areas. The emphasis was on using a partnership method of commissioning work and sub groups were developing each of the intervention areas. The original business plan was only for three years, up to March 2009, although the funding agreement only ran until March 2007. The next business plan, which would update the original and add more detail, would now be submitted in September rather than June. Bedfordshire and Luton had done well this year in terms of the amount of funding obtained in comparison with other sub-regions but funding could be reduced in future years once the other sub-regions had strengthened their business plans.

He said that BLEDP were recruiting for an intervention manager to help the sub-groups develop the intervention areas, and a research coordinator.

He confirmed that EEDA had commissioned a study to look at rural issues and the contribution that might be made by IIC. BLEDP would also be trying to develop rural proofing of the Bedfordshire and Luton business plan, alongside embedding other issues of sustainability, equality and diversity.

9. BRAF funded project: Research into the potential for conversions of farm buildings

Rachel Beadling, Rosie Fraser and Stephen Rice of Bidwells gave presentations on the research that had been commissioned by Bedfordshire County Council. The research had involved undertaking an assessment of the current and future demand for rural business space in converted farm buildings; development of a strategic plan to ensure the supply over the coming decade; identifying five sites that could be developed for commercial use in the short term; development of a toolkit for farmers. The work had found significant variations throughout the county in terms of agricultural enterprises, tenure (about 35% of farms were tenanted) and business types. Whilst demand was good and likely to increase, there were not always suitable building types in suitable locations. For example, most traditional buildings in the north were already converted to residential use, leaving modern buildings which were more suited to industrial and storage/distribution use. Yet demand for this use was limited due to poor transport links in the area. There was a greater variety of buildings in the south and more potential for a number of uses. Overall there was a genuine lack of redundant buildings. A number of barriers were explored. Finance was an issue, but redundant buildings grants were not felt to be appropriate as there was a need to link development to the market. The ownership and occupation structure could prevent conversions as tenants found it difficult to get landlords' agreements. Sustainability criteria for planning needed to be evaluated to ensure they were relevant. There was also felt to be lack of consistency of application. Farmers were concerned about the need to pay Uniform Business Rates when buildings were unoccupied. Also, there was a need to promote rural business space to businesses.

It was agreed that this subject should be put on the agenda of the September BRAF meeting. Sarah Hughes offered to prepare a paper for consideration at the meeting.

10. Update on the Rural Gateway

Diane Budd explained that Rural Gateway was the response to EEDA's decision that there should be a regional approach to providing support to rural businesses. It had its origins in the independent county rural hubs such as BRBS. Rural Gateway provided a network of specialist advisors that were separate from, but worked under the Business Link umbrella.

There were Rural Information Officers and Travelling Rural Information Officers in each county. It operated on an Information/Diagnostics/Brokerage model and did not deliver services itself. Her work covered all sorts of businesses – start ups, small and large businesses, market towns, land-based, or businesses in urban areas that related to the rural economy.

EEDA was reviewing Business Link contracts. Rural Gateway has funding until March 2007; thereafter it was not yet known where the service would sit.

11. Update on Shuttleworth Enterprise Centre

Anthony Goggin reported that the new centre, branded “Shuttleworthbusiness” had been opened on 23 March by Alastair Burt MP. Over 200 people attended the launch, which had included a “Dragons Den” session. Four people so far were interested in setting up incubation businesses there.

12. Update on the Local Area Agreement

David Brewer explained how the LAA would define the relationship between local and central Government. There was a determination to improve partnership working in the county and a new Countywide Assembly was being set up to enable wide involvement in the development of the LAA. The intention was to focus support on those who need it most, and he flagged up the particular problem of building evidence of rural deprivation due to its dispersed nature. He confirmed that a copy of the LAA was being sent to all town and parish councils, and that town and parish councils would be represented on the Countywide Assembly. Defra’s Rural Social and Community Programme was due to be aligned with the LAA in 2006/7. Consideration needed to be given to what rural-proofing meant in practice and how generic rural and environmental issues in Bedfordshire could be evidenced.

In discussions it was acknowledged that there was a difficulty in translating to communities what was happening with the LAA and how they fed into it. David felt that this would get easier once there was evidence of improvement, e.g. less pot-holes, better exam results.

The issue of what was being done to develop high environmental standards for new housing in the county was raised. It was agreed this should be picked up as an item in a future BRAF meeting.

13. Any other business

- (i) Mark Smith reported that Mid Beds CVS, Bedford Funding Advice Bureau and North Beds CVS would merge before the end of July.
- (ii) Mark flagged up that the Community Liaison Forums were under review and radical changes were expected.
- (iii) Mark reported that the planning decision on Center Parcs had been pushed back again to 7 June. It seemed likely that planning permission would be refused because it was a green belt site.
- (iv) Janet Ridge circulated leaflets setting out dates for exhibitions on the NIRAH proposals.
- (v) Revd David Quinn was retiring as agricultural chaplain and moving out of Bedfordshire. Also, following reorganisation at Beds County Council, Paul Vann would no longer be their representative on BRAF. Thanks were given for the contributions that both had made to BRAF.

14. Date of next meeting

Wednesday 6 September 2006.