

NOTES OF THE BEDFORDSHIRE RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM MEETING HELD AT SHUTTLEWORTH COLLEGE ON 20 NOVEMBER 2006

Attending

Sarah Hughes	Beds County Council – Economic Growth Group
Mark Smith	CVS-Mid and North Bedfordshire
Paula Grayson	Business, & Beds & Luton Fair Play
Tim Isaac	CLA
Susan Garbutt	Bedford Borough Council
Janet Ridge	Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Rachel Carrington	NFU
Richard Inman	GO East
Geoffrey Leigh	Norfolk RCC
Anthony Goggin	Agricultural Development in the Eastern Region/ Shuttleworth College
Karen Oellermann	South Beds LSP
Keith Blackburn	Essex County Council
Diane Budd	Rural Gateway
John Thomas	LSC
Roger Greene	Methodist Church Rural Officer & Chaplain
David Morgan	Beds & Cambs Rural Support Group
Ann Lovesey	Beds Association of Town and Parish Councils & County Federation of WIs
Alison Slatcher	Bedford Borough Council Economic Development Unit
Ann Collett-White	Campaign to Protect Rural England
Sue Raven	Greensand Trust
Richard Woolnough	Greensand Trust
Stephen Sleight	Bedfordshire Rural Transport Partnership
Mike Johnston	Shuttleworth College
Kate Belinis	CDA Herts
David Wood	Rural Action East
Jon Balaam	Beds County Council – Countryside Access Service
Heather Webb	Beds & Luton Biodiversity Partnership
Chris Allen	EEDA
Linda Willis	Bedfordshire PCT

1. Welcome

Sarah Hughes chaired, and welcomed members and guests to the meeting. Reverend Roger Greene and Tim Isaac were welcomed as new BRAF members.

2. Apologies

Apologies had been received from:

Anne-Marie Hamilton, Anthony Davison, John Gelder, Alex Francis, Jill Dickinson, Stephen Rice, Chris Barnes

3. Notes and matters arising from September meeting

The notes of the September meeting were formally agreed.

Matters arising

Rural Development Programme

Jane M reported that a revised draft Regional Implementation Plan for the new Rural Development Programme for England had been submitted to Defra on 13 October and was available on the East of England Rural Forum website.

Market Towns

Jane M reported that a meeting had been held on 14 September with Sally Williams of Action for Market Towns, who had set out a number of funding and development opportunities funded regionally by EEDA for market towns. It was felt that many towns needed support on the ground to access this funding. It had been agreed that JM should draft a short outline, possibly for IIC funding, for a post to stimulate and support activity in Bedfordshire.

4. Business Planning

Jane M ran through the note of the Steering Group meeting in October which had been circulated in advance of the meeting.

BRAF Conference – the proposed focus of the conference was supported. It was noted that the timing was particularly apt given the consultation on the future of rural post offices and the timing of the Lyons report.

Redundant Farm Buildings – Sarah Hughes reported on progress since the last BRAF meeting. The working group had met on 2 November and agreed objectives. It had been agreed that key issues were planning, ownership, environment, viability, building and transport. A “How to Guide” would be developed for farmers and landowners. The group also discussed developing a case study based upon one of the examples in the Bidwells report. A further meeting was to be held on 20 November. **Action: JM to let Helen Lazarus know of similar work in other counties.**

5. Rural-proofing update

Jane M recapped on the rural proofing reports carried out on the LAA and IIC Business Plan. The report on the LAA had been submitted to the LAA manager and a response was awaited. The IIC report had been submitted in draft form but had not been formally signed off by the Steering Group as it was concerned that the report should not be seen as the end of rural-proofing and that commitment was needed to taking steps to improve delivery in rural areas. The IIC Business Information Group was to consider the report on 24 November. Chris Allen emphasised that EEDA wanted to see robust rural-proofing. There was a lack of consistency across the region, and EEDA were using consultants to find a common approach.

6. Development of Beds and Luton Tourism Strategy

Sarah H provided an update on the draft strategy and the key recommendations. A slimmed down action plan was to be produced, and the partnership structure reviewed. Actions would need to be prioritised. She requested members to copy any comments to BLEDP and Helen Shore at Beds County Council. In discussion, it was noted that the strategy did not refer to Hidden Britain Centres initiative. A lot of reliance was being placed on projects like NIRAH and Centerparcs which were a long way off. Links should be made with the University of Bedfordshire sports therapy work and Disabled Resource Centre, the Physical Activity, Health and Well-Being Strategy of Beds Borough Council and volunteer activity including Connexions.

7. Report from the East of England Rural Forum

Janet Ridge gave a report on the 20 September meeting and undertook to circulate the minutes when available. Updates had been received from the Market Towns and Housing sub-groups. A market towns conference had been held on 7 November. A group had been set up to take forward a strategic review of the EERF. There had been a discussion on access to services, dominated by the issue of rural post offices. There had been no consensus about funding for rural post offices. Janet noted that Defra was going through a fundamental review of its rural strategy and key issues were climate change and water management, followed by governance and citizen participation. The Government were

looking for answers to address rural issues and there was a role to be played by organisations like BRAF. The afternoon session had followed up on the priorities that had been identified at the Learning & Skills sub group's conference earlier in the year. It was also reported that EERF had been asked to sit on the EEDA Strategic Committee and would feed into the Regional Economic Strategy review.

8. Sustainable Rural Communities – session with the Rural Advocate

The Government's Rural Advocate and Chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities chairman, Dr Stuart Burgess, raised the green challenge for rural communities. He said that with climate change high on the political agenda and in the public awareness, there was a perception in some quarters that rural communities were less sustainable because of their size, fewer services and greater reliance on cars. Government, rural communities and those providing services needed to rise to the challenge of finding new, innovative ways of providing services and community transport, meeting affordable housing needs, and increasing local employment opportunities. There were also new opportunities to be seized such as producing crops for renewable energy and the growing interest in locally produced foods. The session provoked a lengthy discussion covering access to services, including NHS mergers leading to increased mileages, collecting a sound evidence base, the need to make best use of community buildings, including pubs, village halls and church buildings, the vital role of the voluntary sector, asset transfer initiatives. Dr Burgess raised the prospect of a formal Rural Advocate visit to Bedfordshire.

9. 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

Paula Grayson – adult education

Budgets for adult education had been cut last year, other than for literacy/numeracy/IT. This was detrimental to areas of deprivation.

It was agreed that with adult skills being a key intervention under the IIC Business Plan it would be timely to look at this issue at the next BRAF meeting, but that the issue of community consultation raised by Richard Woolnough at the last meeting should not be lost sight of. **Action: Jane M to put skills/adult education on February agenda.**

10. AOB

Stephen Sleight said that the Beds Rural Sports and Physical Activities Group was holding a show and tell workshop on 29 November.

11. Next meeting

9 February 2007