



**BEDFORDSHIRE
RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM**

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Sean Crawford
EEDA
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Dear Sean

**REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION PLAN FOR THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT
PROGRAMME FOR ENGLAND IN THE EAST OF ENGLAND**

Thank you for coming to the BRAF meeting on 16 May.

I am writing to set out the views expressed by BRAF members in response to EEDA's consultation exercise – thank you for agreeing a small extension of the deadline.

BRAF has over 30 organisations within its membership, and a current list of members is annexed to this response. Its members include representatives from a range of sectors across the rural economy including health organisations, environmental groups, local authorities, rural development groups, farming interests, business interests and education and skills groups. BRAF seeks to address rural service provision, social exclusion, and the economic and environmental needs of rural Bedfordshire.

Focus of funding

Whilst accepting that the EU Regulation imposes restrictions on the activities which can be funded, we hope that Defra and EEDA will interpret the Regulation as flexibly as possible. In particular, the East of England Rural Delivery Framework has a strong social dimension which is not currently reflected in the proposed themes for the Regional Implementation Plan. "Productivity in Rural Areas", a Defra report in November 2005 states "The strong relationship between the strength of an area's social capital and its economic success should be reflected in public interventions. Improving access to services, high quality community meeting places and supporting

development of the voluntary and community sectors must be taken forward alongside “hard” economic interventions.“

There must be some sub-regional flexibility about the priorities. For example, the emphasis on forestry/woodland activities has less relevance to the realities in Bedfordshire which has only 7655 hectares of woodland. We hope there will also be flexibility about cross-boundary activities. This may point to having a more significant share of the funding allocated to Leader-type, locally developed programmes.

The intention is to focus funding where other public sector investment is not available or appropriate. We understand that other funding streams are potentially available, such as Investing in Communities and the Structural Funds, but rural needs often take a back seat to urban priorities. It is therefore vital that EEDA and GO East ensure that rural areas are not overlooked when expenditure decisions are made under these other programmes. It is very important that planning for these programmes should be coordinated at regional and local level.

Delivery

Whilst acknowledging the arguments made for an investment plan approach, rather than application-led approach, we would emphasise the need to ensure that the timescales for drawing up investment plans are adequate, and that the terms of the Compact are observed in consulting the voluntary and community sector. We are unclear how the fact that the majority of applications will be made direct to EEDA (i.e. those outside the funding to be delivered via the LEADER approach) squares with this investment plan/strategic approach.

There needs to be a mechanism to safeguard the involvement of the voluntary and community sector. The need for funding to be claimed in arrears is a major barrier to participation by the voluntary and community sector and we would urge that EEDA lobby Defra and the EU for a change to this requirement.

Given the timescales, we hope that there will be good communication with stakeholders as the Regional Implementation Plan is developed. This is particularly significant in relation to the funding allocated to the Leader-style programmes. We look forward to more details becoming available at an early stage about the amount of funding and criteria for the development of programmes under this approach.

I hope these comments are helpful. These comments are not intended as a substitute for, or prejudice, any specific comments or representations that Forum members may make on behalf of their own organisations.

Yours sincerely

Jane Markham
BRAAF Coordinator

Bedfordshire Rural Affairs Forum: Current Membership

Agricultural Development in the Eastern Region, Shuttleworth College
Bedford Borough Council
Bedfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils
Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Rural Support Group
Bedfordshire County Training Ltd
Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Bedfordshire County Council
Bedfordshire Heartlands Primary Care Trust
Bedford Primary Care Trust
Bedfordshire Wildlife Trust
Bell Consultancy
British Trust of Conservation Volunteers
Church of England
Countryside Agency
Campaign to Protect Rural England
East of England Development Agency
Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group
GO-East/DEFRA
Greensand Trust
Ivel and Ouse Countryside Project
Landscape 2000
Learning and Skills Council – Bedfordshire and Luton
Marston Vale Trust
Mid Bedfordshire District Council
Mid Bedfordshire Council for Voluntary Service
National Federation of Womens Institutes
North Bedfordshire Council for Voluntary Service
North Chilterns Trust
National Farmers Union
Rural Gateway
South Bedfordshire District Council
Sport England
Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire
Wildlife Trust