



The LSP Consultation
ODPM
Zone 5/K10
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London
SW1E 5DU

2 March 2006

Dear Sir/Madam

LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS: SHAPING THEIR FUTURE

I am responding on behalf of the Bedfordshire Rural Affairs Forum (BRAf). 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. It is currently supported by funding provided by the East of England Development Agency, channelled through the Bedfordshire and Luton Economic Development Partnership.

It can be difficult for the needs of rural areas to be recognised because they cannot demonstrate deprivation through statistical evidence such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation because populations are dispersed and affluence and deprivation may be mixed within the same community. In Bedfordshire, the priorities of the key statutory players tend to be driven by poor economic performance and the associated relative concentrations of deprivation in the urban areas of Bedford, Dunstable and Luton.

BRAf commissioned rural-proofing of the emerging Community Strategies (one at county level, three at district level) in 2003. The rural-proofing found that there was a general lack of acknowledgement of the rurality of the area or the need for differential solutions, and that where specific rural issues were identified such as poor transport links or lack of benefits advice in rural areas, these were seldom addressed in action plans. It also found that there was a need to engage rural communities more fully and to improve rural representation on the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs).

BRAf is therefore keen to see mechanisms by which rural communities, the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and parish council associations can be represented on or feed views into LSPs.

BRAF considers parish plans should play an important role in linking rural communities to LSPs and the community plans. They can contribute evidence of community needs and, by aggregating information from individual parish plans to pull out common themes, they have the potential to be a tool to influence and inform service providers and help target resources. Through the parish plan process, parishes are able to put together a formal vision for their local area, identify areas of need and are encouraged to think who needs to be involved to address these needs. The latter might be the community itself through voluntary action, the local authority or other service providers or several of these in combination.

We therefore welcome the reference to parish plans in the consultation document and would like to see clear mechanisms for the community views represented in parish plans to be considered by LSPs. Whilst this is happening in some areas of the country (and a protocol has just been agreed by the Mid-Bedfordshire LSP for example) it is far from widespread. Guidance needs to be developed to ensure a consistency of approach across the country and to monitor local progress. Parish Plan committees could also benefit from having named contacts on the LSP to contact with respect to the actions identified in the plan.

For community planning/action to be a success it has to show results. Communities have not always received the support of Local Authorities and organisations to help them take forward their identified priorities for action and this can add to their fatigue and lead to frustration.

There have been a number of different funding streams to support models that promote community planning, and we consider there needs to be a consistent approach to provide adequate resources for parish plans. This is both in terms of small grants for parishes to assist with the costs of producing the plans, but also for organisations that can support them in the process. The Rural Community Councils in particular provide support, but there are also other VCS organisations which can provide information and raise awareness of issues. The principles of sustainable development, the environment and social inclusion, for example, are principles which are over arching and important, but which a community may not pick up on if left entirely unsupported to produce their plan. It is also often the case that the economic workings of the parish are not given a great deal of weight by the parish. This can have a great impact on the community and outside institutions may be able to help redress this imbalance. If we have a suite of excellent parish plans, we should also have excellent, sustainable community strategies – if the process is truly bottom up

I hope these comments are helpful. They broadly represent the views and opinions expressed by Forum members, and are not intended substitute for, or prejudice, any specific comments or representations that Forum members may make on behalf of their own organisations.

Yours faithfully

Jane Markham
BRAAF Coordinator

BRAF membership

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