



**BEDFORDSHIRE
RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM**

The Barn • Buttercup Farm
Hockliffe Road • Tebworth
Bedfordshire LU7 9QA

Tel: 01525 878149
Fax: 01525 877224
email: braf@bedsrcc.org.uk

Pacian Andrews
Rural Social and Communities Programme
Defra, Level 2, Ergon House
Horseferry Road
London
SW1P 2AL

27 September 2005

Dear Sir

Consultation on Defra's proposed new Rural Social and Community programme

I am responding on behalf of the Bedfordshire Rural Affairs Forum (BRAAF). BRAAF 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. BRAAF seeks to address rural service provision, social exclusion, and the economic and environmental needs of rural Bedfordshire. It is supported by funding provided by the East of England Development Agency, channelled through the Bedfordshire and Luton Economic Development Partnership.

General

We are pleased that funding is being made available for this programme. The current funding for Parish Plans, Rural Housing Enabler and Community Development Worker has been valuable and, once specific funding for these activities has ceased, it would be a step backward if we were not able to build on the experience of these programmes. We strongly support the principle of sub-regions being able to identify priorities and mechanisms based on local circumstances.

However, there are some fundamental concerns:

- the delay to the consultation means that there cannot be due consideration of comments before the Government gives its response to the contributions, and will cause significant difficulties for sub-regional partnerships in meeting the timetable. You are consulting on the mechanisms for production of business plans and delivery of the programme. From learning the outcome of the consultation – and it will be especially important in the practicalities to know whether the Local Area Agreement (LAA) route has been adopted - there will be little over a month to identify a lead partner, research and prepare the evidence base and detailed business cases that will be required. We do not think this is workable, even with the availability of funding in 2005 to assist with the start up of the programme. Furthermore, the outline business plan for the LAA has to be written by the end of September. As this is before the closing date for the consultation, it would seem impossible to fit the two together. The timing is also out of step with the timescale for agreeing the new regional rural delivery frameworks, with which the business case is meant to fit.
- We would urge that the process is kept as simple as possible. Although the aim of the programme is to streamline and simplify, the proposed business planning process is not proportionate to the funding that may be available. In the East of England Region, we have been told that sub-regional funding may be in the order of £100-200k. Based on previous division of resources in the region, Bedfordshire can expect to be at the lower end of this range.
- This is short-term funding. The programme needs to be sustained over the longer term.
- We would also underline the need for cross-Departmental working. There has to be a cohesive approach to developing LAAs, Investing in Communities plans, Regional Rural Delivery Frameworks and the Rural Social and Communities Programme, with the inter-linkages made clear.

Q1: Allocation of resources

We support Option 1 for determining allocation to regions – this is the most simple and transparent method.

Q2: Would this way of distributing funding provide the right balance between (a) the need to quality assure business cases; and (b) the importance of VCS partnerships/consortia having some confidence on the likely scale of funding before they put together their business cases

(b) is very important. The mechanism for distribution from region to sub-region needs to be clarified early on by the Government Office for the region. Sub-regional partners have to prepare a business case, will there be a notional amount for each sub-region? Otherwise, given that the regional purse is finite, will there effectively be an element of competition between sub-regions?

We would be grateful for clarification of whether funding would be allocated for the two year period or on a year by year basis.

VCS partnerships/consortia also need to have a mandate before starting to research and develop a business case which is a sizeable undertaking. For example, there are consortia under the Change Up Agenda, Sub-Regional Economic Partnership, Rural Forums, Local Strategic Partnerships, Investing in Communities Partnerships. Who will decide which body should take the lead? Also, a much clearer steer needs to be given on the amount and depth of information Government Offices will be looking for than is currently provided in Paragraph 6.2. The risk is that the process and cost of preparing the business case is disproportionate to the amount of funding to be granted.

Q3. Do you agree that, where all or part of a sub-region is covered by a Local Area Agreement, the relevant part of the funding for this programme should be included in the overall funding for the LAA?

No – this risks over-complicating rather than simplifying the process. The LAA targets are quite high level and are not likely to mesh well with the activities under the RSCP. The document does not make the proposed relationship between the LAA and the sub-regional partnership clear. How would the partnership access the funding to enable it to deliver the programme? Again, how would the partnership get a mandate and who from – the local authority or the Government Office?

Whilst we applaud the stated strategic objective of the programme of getting more effective community and VCS voices in Local Area Agreements, Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Development Frameworks, this is not realistically achievable in the timescale for the business plan:

- How does this work where priorities identified by LSPs are urban and based on geographic measures such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation? How would the Government Office ensure the Local Strategic Partnership properly represents rural VCS interests and takes account of the need to deliver the aims of this programme? In Bedfordshire, we commissioned rural proofing of all the community strategies and by and large there was lack of rural representation and few rural priorities were identified.
- There is no indication yet of how rural interests will be represented in our LAA partnerships.

Q4. Do you agree that, for sub-regions not covered by a LAA, decisions on the mechanisms for production of business plans and delivery of this programme should be taken on a case-by-case basis?

Yes – for all sub-regions *whether or not covered* by a LAA.

Q5. Which, if any, existing partnership mechanism would be the most appropriate for delivering the programme?

As in Q4, this will need to be determined on a case by case basis. In this county, Bedfordshire Rural Affairs Forum would be well placed to fulfil the role, as a forum of over 30 organisations. Its members include health organisations, environmental groups, local authorities, rural development groups, farming interests, business interests and education and skills groups. The Regional Rural Forum could play a key role in monitoring and advising.

Q6. Should the programme reward good practice relating to the joining up of activities with other regional and sub-regional activities and organisations? If so, should this be in the form of higher funding?

No.

- Arguably, the opposite might apply. If a partnership is not succeeding in doing this, it may need more resource to build capacity of the partnership. The programme also needs to be realistic about what is achievable in the timescale and the amount of funding.
- If funding has already been allocated, where would the higher funding come from?
- It makes the system even more complicated.

Q7. Are there particular issues that you think should be reflected in the quality standards for RCCs?

This seems an odd question given that the consultation document does not set out what the funding for the RCCs will be covering. ACRE is in any case developing Good Practice Quality Standards and all RCCs should have reached those standards by 2008. The statement about exploring joint performance management of the RCCs between Government Offices for the Regions and Local Authority funders is also out of place. It is not clear, but presumably this is just referring to the how RCCs deliver the objectives of any specific SLAs with Defra or local authorities. For example, in Bedfordshire, funding from Defra and Local Authorities only accounts for around 8% of its turnover. It would not be in order for Defra to presume performance management of all of the RCCs activities.

Q8. We have set out a very broad scope for the proposed programme. Is there anything that should be specifically included or excluded?

The second paragraph of 5.3 sets out how sub-regional projects could play a part in enabling rural issues to be picked up in more generic work and to help elevate the rural aspects of these issues up the agenda of mainstream bodies. This role of promoting rural issues in the local agendas, and linking community needs into strategy building could usefully be specifically picked up in the illustrative examples.

Q9. Are these the right outcome measures for the programme or are there better measures?

Community Capacity Building - the outcome measure is very ambitious, and it is difficult to see how it would be measured.

Social Exclusion measures - these look very complicated. How much will it cost to assess - the costs of measuring must be proportionate to the amount of funding. As the programme is based on a partnership approach, who will measure and who will fund it?

Voluntary and community sector and parish council capacity building

What has the proposed measure got to do with the aim expressed in the paragraph above it? It is a separate issue to the implementation of the sub-regional business plan and would not give any indication of the success of the sub-regional business plan.

I hope these comments are helpful. These comments are not intended to 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
- Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire
- South Bedfordshire District Council
- Sport England
- Wildlife Trust