



Independent

NORTH EAST RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM

Championing the interests of rural communities

THURSDAY 20 SEPTEMBER 2007 - KIRKHARLE COURTYARD

MEETING NOTE

Attendees :

NERAF members :

David Stewart (Chair)		Ian Brown (Vice-Chair)	
David McKnight	Phil Hughes	Bill Rowe	Lesley Allen
Norma Foster	Fiona Chesters	Ruth Dent	Barbara Armstrong
Patrick Lavery	Jen Hall	Julia Lyford	Jason Robinson-Gay

Observers and guests:

Steve Brooker & Rachel Ford - North East Assembly
Ken Roy - Commission for Rural Communities

Secretarial team ;

Yvonne Greenlay, Claire Scott & Kevin Brown – Government Office North East

Apologies:

John Littlefair - Forum Member
Bryan Rees - Government Office North East

Minutes of the last meeting : agreed.

Matters Arising :

Gov Office reported that a meeting was to take place on 3 October when consultants appointed by DEFRA to assess the delivery and progress of the Rural Social & Community Programme would be sharing their initial findings. The findings of NERAF's own scrutiny into the local roll-out arrangements had already been fed into that process. The NERAF report will be finalised and circulated separately.

Matters discussed

1. David opened the meeting by welcoming all new members to the group and expressing thanks and good wishes to existing member Bill Rowe, who was attending his last NERAF meeting before retiring to France.



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2. Induction Exercise

Following the appointment of several new members, an introduction and team building session was held during which members were encouraged to highlight what, from their own personal experiences, is working well and what is not working as well at grass-roots level. Contributions were wide-ranging (see annex A) and in many cases would necessitate a shift in organisational and government policy. The point was made that when making a case for change NERAF must be able to show evidence to support its arguments. Members were encouraged to focus on developing and energising their community links in the months ahead, not only as a mechanism for developing that evidence base, but to strengthen and support NERAF's claims of representing rural citizen interests and views.

3. Impact of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD)

There was a sense that, whilst unwelcome, the August outbreak had not impacted too severely on the upland farmers, but that the September outbreak had fallen at a critical point in the operational year and would therefore have much greater financial and social consequences. Added to this was frustration over different, more flexible arrangements being put in place in Scotland and Wales, with no consideration being given to a regionalised easing of restrictions for those English regions most remote from the Surrey sites.

A discussion followed during which members listed what they saw as the critical issues surrounding the government's response to the FMD outbreak. (See Annex B)

It was felt that NERAF had a role to play in drawing attention to these issues at a regional and national level, including writing to the Minister for the North East, Nick Brown to highlight concerns, put forward proposals and, if the restrictions continued, make a case for regionalisation of their implementation. Such action would need to be supported by fact-based evidence, so members agreed to undertake some research within their individual communities using a short questionnaire developed for the purpose. The Chair agreed to collate the data (much of which was likely to be anecdotal rather than numerical or quantitative) and use it as appropriate.

Meantime, the Vice-Chair would explore with the RDA whether RDPE or other mechanisms could be used to offer financial support to those (mainly farmers) most directly affected.

Members felt it important that lessons from this recent outbreak, and its impact on farming and rural communities, should be fed through to organisers of the 'Year of Farming & Food' and the learning environments surrounding it, in ways that make it



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real to policy makers . The Vice-chair agreed to do so via his close connections with the initiative.

4. Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) - Update

Ken Roy, Director of Rural Analysis, outlined the background to CRC and highlighted its role as providing well-informed, independent advice to government and ensuring that policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England, whilst being consistent with Sustainable Development principles.

Affordable rural housing and RDPE are high on the CRC agenda, as well as trying to ensure that the sub-national review is rural-proofed, ensuring that it doesn't support City Regions at the detriment of rural areas.

Ken welcomed the information flow that NERAF gives CRC and explained that CRC can provide NERAF with another level of influence for the things it wants to do or change.

Members' attention was drawn to the CRC website as a good source of information on a range of rural issues.

6. NERAF Work Plan

The group discussed the content of the draft work plan which had been circulated prior to the meeting. Members were invited to volunteer to take the lead on particular areas of work or representational roles. The following was agreed:

- David McKnight to succeed leader of Communications Group and Norma Foster to join the group with special reference to website development.
- Durham Members to work with Phil Hughes on developing strategic links with Durham Economic Rural group – similar to those in place with NSP. Fiona Chesters to explore the prospects of similar arrangements in Tees Valley. No action at this stage in relation to Tyne & Wear.
- David Stewart and Jen Hall to look further into formal NERAF links with Regional Housing Board
- Jason Robinson-Gay, Julia Lyford and Norma Foster to be NERAF leads on work with Business Link North East (BLNE) re work related to reducing burden on SMEs and micro businesses and the Kirkharle rural business focus group project.

As a long agenda meant time for discussion was limited, David Stewart undertook to take away, review, and prioritise the workplan. Where appropriate he would then approach individual members to enlist their support in taking action forward.



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Issues which some members felt might usefully be added included work around : Rural Pathfinder outcomes/lesson; research into complexities of farming and rural life; rural education programmes; BLNE delivery; vol&community funding; strategic partnership rural delivery; rural services; access to health services; and rural transport.

7. Changing regional landscape - Steve Brooker, North East Assembly (NEA)

David Stewart alerted members to the possible impact which the planned disappearance of the NEA within the next 12-18 months would have on future regional policy making. For NERAF, losing the NEA will cut off a number of policy access routes and potentially lessen its sphere of influence. Much of the progress made over the last two years in ensuring recognition of rural dimension in policy making could be lost, which is why it is important to maintain as many policy and operational links as possible during the transfer of responsibilities from the Assembly to the RDA, and the development of the future Regional Integrated Strategy.

It was suggested that the Integrated Regional Framework (IRF) – a high level strategic document designed as a backdrop for how the region's economic, environmental and social policies should function - might be an influential mechanism for ensuring key rural messages are not overlooked during this transition phase. Steve Brooker, Sustainability Manger with the NEA has been directly involved in the revision of the IRF and welcomed any comments from Members on its content. Dagmar Winter and Lesley Allen volunteered to lead on preparing a formal response to the re-draft currently out for consultation.

On a more general level, Steve and Rachel Ford were able to cite examples of where, partly as a result of the NERAF Chair's persistence, consideration had recently been given to how best to rural proof key regional strategies. Momentum for this must continue but unfortunately whilst several rural proofing tools currently exist, all have their limitations. This had been clearly demonstrated by the NEA team's effort to find a suitable tool with which to rural proof the regional housing strategy. Members were interested to hear of the NEA's attempts to create a tool based on the outcomes of the Regional Rural Priority Statement and agreed to consider using that method in their consideration of the IRF.

David expressed his thanks to NEA for helping to get NERAF involved in this work.



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8. AOB

- The next meeting will take place on Wednesday, 12 December 2007
- Timings for future meetings were expected to revert to 9.30am – 1pm

(Prepared and circulated by NERAF Secretariat)

Annex A

What's working well and not so well - Issues affecting rural communities and rural service delivery as identified by NERAF members

❖ Barriers to taking action/ getting things done -

If someone has a bright idea, often support and infrastructure isn't there to bring it to fruition.

Poor or declining community responsibility and relations

Disaggregation of larger contracts. The tendency of agencies like JobCentre+ generally to award contracts only to large corporate operations (often based outside the region) and an unwillingness to disaggregate contracts to allow smaller companies to bid.

(Leader+) There appears to be a lack of willingness to co-operate amongst rural partners, something which the main rural agencies are failing to see the relevance of.

(Leader+) Usual suspects involvement in rural issues and the lack of new people getting involved might stifle new ideas and approaches. Local anecdotal evidence suggests small local organisations are expressing interest in being involved but are being dismissed because of their size.

Advice on grant applications from Business Link and the Department for Business Enterprise & Regulatory Reform (DBERR – formerly DTI) can be poor and un-supportive

The length of time it takes to access funds under Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) and widespread concerns that a proportion of funding will be lost due to the national hiatus in getting the programme up and running. RDA needs to be open on likely timescales and correct the latter misconception.



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A perceived lack of value added by Natural England since their creation and questions over future funding to replace existing environment support schemes.

No effective regional food group is yet in place despite the RDA having funding and promises made when contract was awarded in May 07 that the initiative would hit the ground running.

The impact the current banking crisis surrounding Northern Rock Foundation might have on the funds being available for community projects.

Difficulties experienced by development trusts and voluntary organisation/projects as a result of the withdrawal of bank-rolling facilities.

❖ **Quality and access to services in rural areas -**

The dwindling number of rural post offices and associated rural businesses

Post 16 transport to places of education is poor and cost is often prohibitive.

Current housing allocation structure works against affordable rural housing.

Hospital and GP practise closures and current strategic health authorities' approach to centralising services means access to services is reduced. Provision for the elderly and mentally infirm, and access for those invulnerable group (for whom distances and poor transport links are a problem) are especially at risk. Problems are not only restricted to patient access but to those visiting and providing support.

Policing in some (but not all) rural areas – closure of local stations leading to diminishing service coverage, increased response times/distances. In contrast, Farm Watch is very effective.

Information on access to the countryside needs to be clearer to assist and inform urban citizens

Lack of activities available for young people in small towns and market towns

Inconsistent availability and reliability of Broadband service in rural areas hinders business development and access to services.



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❖ Agri-farming

Significant reductions in numbers employed in agriculture-based activity and numbers entering agri-training.

Reductions in available skill labour force – such a current shortage within contract shepherding and sheering.

❖ Impact of changing or restrictive policy

Tax credits rules which require claimants to produce evidence of annual income disadvantages those working in rural communities due to the irregular and seasonal nature of their employment arrangements.

The new Business Link structure potentially resulting in a loss of delivery at a local level

The region is running out of rural development sites, due in part to reduced allocations but also to a growing trend for previously business development sites being converted to residential use (eg barn conversions). Planners are hindered by lack of business use applications which might otherwise block conversion decision.

Landlocked properties, and the problems associated with Countryside Rights of Way (CROW) Act in respect of access and selling houses.

Trade and residential waste disposal are both affected by changes in legislation now being imposed on councils. This has led to an increase in fly-tipping in a number of rural settings.

Annex B

NERAF members highlighted the following concerns/issues in the aftermath of the 2007 Aug and Sept FMD outbreaks:

50-75% of uphill farmers' annual income is generated at this point in the year. Everyone is 'holding tight' in the short term but as it continues it will impact on cashflows leading to real financial hardship and increased emotional and mental stress.

Lambs remaining in fields still need to be fed, but feed has risen sharply in price. When lambs are eventually sold, they will be fat, which will lower their price.



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Despite current situation rent reviews are getting underway – insensitive and potentially final straw for those struggling to remain in the industry.

Payments from the Rural Payments Agency are behind schedule causing further cashflow problems for farmers.

Farmers and others need a single easily accessible source of advice and information.

There is widespread frustration with the short-termism of policy decisions

Continued importing of beef from South America annoys and frustrates our farmers as FMD is endemic in that part of the world.

Vaccination would have prevented this should take place. Although this would result in a ban on exporting, exports only make-up a fraction of the finances involved in sales.

Even if movement restrictions are lifted, the 20 day “stand-still” period is not helpful

The impact isn't just on farmers. B& B industry, suppliers, contractors and traders, event organisers, markets as well as those who gain casual employment from working in these and farming industries at this time are affected.

If businesses close, they often don't reopen as another business and the property is eventually turned into housing. This will have a social impact.

Blue Tongue will inevitably to be the next disease to hit.

The attitude from farmers during the 2001 outbreak was antagonistic at times and did nothing to help maintain tourism.

Saying that the countryside is “closed” has a massive impact on tourism so there is a need to be more specific about which parts of the countryside are open.

Quick-lime use should be considered when disposing of carcasses to help stop the spread of FMD.

Haulage contractors need to be better regulated than they were in the 2001 outbreak.