

North East Rural Affairs Forum
1 May 2007, Stella House, Newcastle Upon Tyne

Present: David Stewart (Chair) Ian Brown
Jason Robinson-Gay David McKnight
Jen Hall Julia Lyford
Bill Rowe
Yvonne Greenlay (RAF Co-ordinator / Secretary)

Apologies: John Littlefair, Phil Hughes, Bryan Rees

(In Attendance): Chris Kolek (Commission for Rural Communities)
Jeanette Ives (Conf Organiser)
Judith Milne (Government Office for the North East)

1. Minutes and action points of previous meeting:

Minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

Natural England (NE) has agreed to discussion with the Forum to support their future engagement with rural communities. Glyn Bateman (NE) has spoken to colleagues responsible for stakeholder engagement on how best to proceed. Members felt NE and the RDA's plan for delivering RDPE might provide a useful focus to discussions.

2. Matters arising:

GO Review – Yvonne Greenlay gave an update on the current position of the changes within Government Office North East. It was agreed by Forum members that Bryan Rees, Government Office North East, Head of Environment Policy could attend the Forum meetings.

3. Hot Topics (to share with Minister at RAF Chairs mtg) and shared intelligence:

RAF Chairs are required to maintain a list of hot topics to cover at their quarterly meetings with the rural minister. In NERAF's case they will also be used to inform development of the work plan. Members were invited to raise specific issues which comprised:

Funding for arts and culture: Restructuring in Teesdale District Council has resulted in the withdrawal of funding for the arts officer post (previously had been funded by the Arts Council) which takes art out to local people. There has been adverse reaction from communities who appreciated the service and are against the loss of the post. Financially the amount of funding required to continue with the post will have little impact on the Local Authority.

Rural worklessness and barriers to work readiness: The Rural Worklessness Action Research Project is producing a report (focussed on Haltwhistle, Rothbury and Wooler) based on discussions with people, employers and support providers. The conclusions are quite damning – insufficient funding, lack of service provider visibility and agencies not being joined up - but encouragingly the agencies involved are not fighting or challenging

the research findings and accept it is problematic. People without work need to see and be seen by services deliverers and have nowhere to turn if they are unable to find the support that they need. The match for jobs and brokerage opportunities between people and providers are poor – and agencies do accept that this is a problem. There is a suggestion that the main agencies (Bus Link, Job Centre+ and LSC) are output driven based on national targets rather than to address the needs of local people. Agencies also tend to think generically, for example mainly targeting the needs of younger people and those aged over 50, leaving those not in these age brackets less supported. The LSC not prepared to train very small groups ie 4 people, although mentoring schemes are being investigated.

Worklessness is compounded by the usual barriers to employment, such as transport, childcare issues, poor aspiration levels and learning difficulties all of which, employers claim, contributes to local people not being 'work ready'. Those best able to provide solutions to the real issues lie in the social justice arena rather than employment and training.

Consideration should be given to inviting a Job Centre+ and/or LSC representative to a future meeting to discuss their take on the issue and solutions being offered.

Government statistical data does not recognise deprivation in rural areas; the perception is that the rural areas are well off. As 40% of migrant workers find work in rural areas it is perceived that there is lots of work in these localities. Studies including those conducted by CRC do not support this, but messages to Defra and ministers are not getting through. NERAF needs to forge alliance with other Forums and the CRC to make an impact. It is the role of the CRC to articulate rural deprivation to government, what's not working and more effective ways need to be found to draw out issues, paint an accurate picture and come up with solutions. A sound evidence base is needed that is capable of challenging the feedback and official lines coming through from Defra and DCLG.

Migrant Workers: A report by CAB for Northumberland was expected shortly on migrant workers. It highlights that not all migrant workers are registered with doctors, and that there are still housing issues. It also suggests there is wide misunderstanding by employers about the registration scheme.

Local Authority Structures: There was some discussion around the rumours / press releases regarding the structures of the local authorities ie two tier or unitary. Whatever the outcome of the re-structuring, the Forum would like to see rural issues within communities addressed in a way that reflects the differences between rural and urban. Authorities should be issued with a template of what a good unitary council would look like and do.

Inefficiencies in the RPA: The issue was pointed out that delays in getting payments from the RPA, and the impact on the wider rural economy remains an issue.

Postcodes: There was some discussion around the mis-representation of postcodes, ie Newcastle postcode for Otterburn and Scottish postcodes for Berwick. Members need to agree if this issue is one that needs to be addressed by the Forum.

4. NERAF Project Update:

Rural Conference: Overall feedback was good – plaudits and no brick-backs – with many feeling challenged by it and welcoming the opportunity for wider networking. For the most part NERAF members themselves had been happy with the event, though one member remained unconvinced about inclusivity (overall size and audience mix of the main debate and workshops) and therefore the validity of what was said and key messages attributed to conference. All discussion in the main hall and in 2 of the 3 workshops were recorded; with all audio material available for further analysis if that would be helpful.

A draft 'post-conference' leaflet, designed to be a permanent reminder of the conference and its messages, was circulated for members' comments. It comprised an A1 folded format incorporating hard-hitting key messages from the speakers and debate, photographs taken during the day and, on the reverse, a map of the region with short 'biogs' of the NERAF members. The concept was endorsed and some changes to text were suggested so ensure key messages from the conference were highlighted. It would be the responsibility of the Forum members to disseminate the literature and it was envisaged that a print run of 1,000 would be needed.

The timing of the letter to the Defra SoS, which was trailed at the conference, is designed to convey key RAF messages rather than those of the event and would best be delayed until pending ministerial changes were resolved.

Action point: David McKnight to co-ordinate work on the leaflet text and messages.

Annual Report: The annual report has been distributed to all those who attended the conference and all the other national Rural Affairs Forums'

Media Training: Four members of the Forum are interested in Media Training (JRG, JH, JL & DMcK). The idea will be explored either via induction programme or as task for Communications subgroup.

Induction for New Members: The Forum is to give suggestions for what to include in induction training to new members. A meeting will be held on 24 July to discuss this.

Action point: Members to be contacted for ideas.

RSCP: Government Office restructuring and staff movement in Defra had made it difficult to contact the right people in connection with the RSCP which had put the report back by about 2/3 weeks. The consultation stage is complete allowing a list of 'lessons learnt' to be produced. Sub-group to meet to discuss the draft report. The final report is expected in July and will be shared with the Forum in advance of the next meeting

Research: The Forum needs to identify what research is needed and put it in the work plan. NERIP recently explored rural evidence but did not reveal any new or unexpected findings for rural localities.

It would be helpful if there was a short synopsis on the distinctive features of the rural North East. Data from CRC's State of the Countryside studies and held by the Northern Way project might be a good starting point. CRC would be receptive to working with a local task group as this could provide them with the evidence needed to support work on specific issues. Research could be undertaken by post graduate students, once projects have been identified. Pan-regional research (with neighbouring regions or those with similar issues) may make more effective use of resources and opportunities. There was a

short discussion about the excellent resources available in Yorks & Humber region via the Rural Observatory.

Action: **Members to suggest possible projects**

Communications: Linked with earlier point on media training the sub-group leader felt it was important to define the Forum's position on image and promotional activities.

Action Point: Sub-group to consider these issues.

Citizen Panel: Recently County Durham and Cumbria debated rural topics and the recommendations were taken to Brussels. Consideration is underway for an event in June/June 2007. NERAF discussed if there would be any scope to influence the RDPE and agreed that attempts should be made to create a link between the Citizen's Panel and the RDA's RDPE engagement process.

Action Point: D McKnight to approach to Frances Rowe.

In time, the European Commission would like to utilise the Citizen Panels to debate broader issues, for instance health.

There is a European Open day which Bill Rowe is attending and he is happy to bring up any issues on behalf of the Forum. John Wright the new National Chair for FSB, a strong supporter of rural issues, is also attending.

Climate Change: It has emerged that most other regional RAFs have climate change on their agenda. NERAF has so far concentrated on other more pressing issues. Members agreed that climate change is now high on the government's agenda but what is needed is a link between the big political issues and the impacts on local rural communities and the lives of the people living there. The Forum should identify one of its members as a climate change champion who will then be responsible for developing NERAF's position on the subject and linking into the strategic debate

Action point: Identify a climate change champion from within membership and position statement.

5. Operational Issues:

GO Structure: The members discussed the Government Office re-structuring, the impact being that there may be less resource. Defra have indicated that the Forum will receive an allocation of £20k; however, the funding which supported the rural stakeholder partnerships may not be available or reduced.

The Rural Board is to publish the NE Rural Priorities Statement. The Forum has observer status on the rural Board through which it retains its right to scrutinize its activities.

Operational/Work Plan: The group discussed the future work plan of the forum and came up with a list of actions to take forward. Members to volunteer where they have particular skills or interests.

Action point: Chair and Co-ordinator to update workplan and allocate tasks to members.

Recruitment: GONE will manage the process for recruiting additional members. Papers were circulated to members outlining how it would be handled. The group asked for a number of things should be included in the job description including time commitment, out of pocket expenses and preferred experiences.

Action point: Members were asked to add to or amend the list of stakeholders to be notified of the process and to highlight any specific skills or qualities that they considered were gaps at present.

6. Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) Update:

CRC has recently undergone a restructuring.. The new structure will be focused on key national programmes into which they will introduce regional dimensions. A regional engagement strategy is being developed to ensure links with RAFs and other key partners are maintained. There will no longer be Regional Affairs Managers and instead links between regional RAFs and CRC will be based on inviting whoever is best placed to help/contribute. The impact for NERAF is that CRC will more likely to engage with the Forum on a business need basis only.

7. Any Other Business:

It was announced formally that Norman Dunn was stepping down. Forum members expressed their thanks for his work and contribution.

Action point: GONE to write officially to Norman. David Stewart to write to Norman on behalf of the Forum

Dates of Meetings:

Thursday 20 September 2007
Wednesday 12 December 2007
Wednesday 12 March 2008
Wednesday 11 June 2008

**Judith Milne
GONE**