



Independent

NORTH EAST RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM

Championing the interests of rural communities

WEDNESDAY 12 March 2008 - GALLOWGATE, GONE

MEETING NOTE

Attendees:

NERAF members:

David Stewart (Chair)
Norma Foster
David McKnight
John Littlefair

Ruth Dent
Dagmar Winter
Jen Hall
Patrick Lavery

Secretarial team:

Yvonne Greenlay & Claire Scott – Government Office North East

Apologies:

Jason Robinson-Gay
Fiona Chesters

Lesley Allen

Non Attendees:

Julia Lyford
Ian Brown (Vice Chair)

Barbara Armstrong
Phil Hughes

1. Welcome and Apologies

- a) Two apologies for absence were received from Fiona Chesters and Jason-Robinson Gay. It was unclear why the other Forum members had been unable to attend the meeting, as Yvonne Greenlay had emailed all the Forum members and had specifically asked them to let the Secretariat team know whether they could make the meeting.
- b) David Stewart welcomed the remaining members to the first meeting of the New Year and explained that he wanted to focus the meeting mainly on regional issues that currently affect members both on an individual basis and from their local communities and is there any way that NERAF can support the concern or respond to it. All the members who were present were asked to contribute their personal views and also views they had gathered from within their own communities to this part of the discussion.



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2. Members Issues

a. What are we hearing that is concerning us and our local communities and how can NERAF respond (eg Pos, GPs, etc)?

a) Norma Foster – Northumberland

- School closures are having a very big impact on local residents (although this is not a problem in Berwick reported Jen Hall);
- The closure of GP's surgeries and Post Offices are also a key area of concern. Although the loss of GP's surgeries had not had the same impact that had been suggested in the recent media reports;
- The local garage in the village where Norma lives has taken over the franchise to run the post office as a combined shop and post office. Unsure if this facility will continue in the longer term.

b) David McKnight – Durham

- The economy;
- Inflation rates and increases in living costs (light and heat);
- Transport costs and fuel costs. The budget has announced that 4X4 vehicles that are driven on farm land will cost £950 to tax, even though the vehicle is vital to the running of the business.

c) John Littlefair – Tees Valley

- The local school was due to close, but is now being rebuilt but is not big enough to accommodate all the children;
- The local post office is earmarked for closure;
- A lack of affordable, social housing;
- The number of young people in the 25-30 age bracket is diminishing as they either want to leave the rural village they live in or can't afford to buy a home there;
- A lack of a skilled and willing workforce from a farming point of view;
- Long hours for young farmers and not a nice working environment. Young people need to be dedicated but they now have different expectations and don't want to work long hours;
- There is a general skills shortage right across the board;
- Young people who once worked in the hills have now taken jobs in Towns.



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d) Patrick Lavery – Northumberland

- Patrick has lost his local Post Office;
- A lack of affordable housing. There is evidence in his area that local land is being sold off at premium prices and then expensive houses will be built which are beyond the affordability of local people.

e) Ruth Dent

- In Middleton in Teesdale there has been a temporary closure (although this may become permanent) of the local Ambulance station. 300 people attended a meeting in the village hall recently to talk about their concerns about the closure;
- The funding for the Ambulance is not ring-fenced for the area, so it can travel across the rest of the region to respond to call outs;
- Ruth is aware of the work of the “Community Based First Responders” and this is a way to buy time until the Ambulance Service can attend. Becoming a First Responder can be onerous, involves training, time commitment and money to buy the equipment.

f) Jen Hall - Berwick

- Market towns, in the promotion of their own agenda, are working against neighbouring villages;
- Jen is concerned about the lack of evidence that the decision a market town takes has considered its impact on neighbouring areas, or that it has used the rural proofing tool. Jen would like to see market towns applying the rural proofing tool, so it can measure the impact on its neighbours;
- Under the plans for the new Unitary Authority in Northumberland the county is being divided into three areas – one with three towns, one with two and one with a single town, 27 brand new community forums to be in place when a new council is created in April 2009. It is very difficult for the community sector to get anything done, as the council is losing vast numbers of experienced staff, delivery and decision making has diminished.



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g) Dagmar Winter

- Closure of GP's surgeries. Dagmar has spoken to a local GP who has signed up to the new contract but is not sure entirely what they had signed up for;
- School closure is not an issue in her area.

Conclusion:

Clearly, there are various local issues but only one regional issue to arise from community level and individual experiences is that of the loss of post offices across the region.

Jen Hall questioned whether there is a role for BLNE to offer support to PO owners to help the businesses become more sustainable, which would lead to the PO functioned being retained, or if this is not possible to retain the PO function it could still operate as a business to benefit the community. It is important to the local community to have the right sort of person who will be open to new ways of working if the PO is to be successful in the longer term. It is also important to give support to elderly post office owners, who in her view, without support they are more likely to sell up and the service will be lost. Another alternative is for pubs, garages or village shops to become hubs and take on the post office function.

Patrick Lavery reported that in Northumberland there are business mentors who he could recommend to work with other businesses to give support.

The members concluded that if communities decide to opt for a "hub" solution then there needs to be an infrastructure to support it, perhaps through a social enterprise venture. BLNE is an obvious source of help and support but various others (Enterprise Agencies etc) could also play a valuable role.

b. Communications Sub Group – David and Norma

The main areas of consideration at this stage is the development of the website as follows:

- The remit was to look at the NERAF conference website that was held a year ago and see whether it could be updated and broadened to publicise the work of the forum, as the content and rational is now getting out of date;
- The site is hosted and paid for until January 2009;



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- It is possible to strip out the content that is already there about the conference and replace it with information about forum members activities, newsletters and other items that the members would like to see hosted there;
- The members gave their endorsement to the work already carried out and further agreed that the communications sub group should continue;
- The work will be procured using the NERAF budget;
- In the summer there will be a need to publish an Annual Report for 2007/08 to meet Defra's requirement for all RAF's to publish an annual report setting out what activities they have carried out in the year and how funding has been spent.

c. BLNE Regulation – Jason Robinson-Gay

Jason is still committed to the Kirkharle Focus Group looking at business regulation. The Business Regulation Agency is very interested in the outcome and recommendations of the Focus Group.

d. Sub Regional Rural Proofing, Proofing Tool and Relationships

Things are progressing well in establishing working relationships with the sub-regional partners.

Tees Valley - A meeting has been arranged for David, Fiona and Yvonne to see John Lowther at the TVJSU on 8th April. David will suggest that NERAF helps to rural-proof the Multi Area Agreement (MAA) for Tees Valley.

Northumberland – Patrick Lavery met with the NSP Rural Group on to explore how to work together and circulated a note of that meeting to members. The three key areas identified as ones to concentrate on are: (1) Access to Services (Particularly Transport), (2) Rural Proofing and (3) Support for Rural Business. The Rural Group has agreed to rural proof all it's own policies.

Patrick reported that the Northumberland Sub-Group will ask the NSP Rural Group when the next meeting takes place what NERAF can do to support the NSP's position in terms of the Local Government Reform, to try and influence the outcome for the better for the citizens of Northumberland.

Durham – No progress to report in Durham which has proved more difficult to penetrate.

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3. Executive Business

An Executive Paper (prepared by the GO RAF Sec Team) had previously been circulated. The meeting drew attention to certain items as follows:

- a. **Taylor** - Matthew Taylor is in the region on Monday 17th March to carry out discussions with regional stakeholders as part of the enquiry that will report to government in July 2008. David Stewart and Jen Hall are participants in the programme.
- b. **RSS** - As the current consultation phase is on the changes only there is little real scope for further formal involvement.
- c. **Annual Report** - The drafting and production of the annual report will be taken forward by the Communications Group.
- d. **Chair and Vice Chair Elections** – David Stewart is willing to continue as Chair of NERAF if this is endorsed by the members. However, he invited other members to consider whether they would like to stand as Chair and he will support anyone who takes that decision. If other members do wish to nominate themselves for Chair the post will involve, some degree of national work. Members will (on a specifically designed form) have the opportunity to nominate themselves for either or both posts and/ or to nominate another person who they feel would be a suitable choice. Those nominated by others will be contacted by the GO Secretariat to see if they are interested in standing. Once all nominations have been received members will then be issued with a voting form. The GO Team will keep the whole process confidential.
- e. **T & S Claims / Meeting Dates** - All claims for T&S should be with the GO Secretariat by next Wednesday 19th March to include any Forum activity up to that date. There was some discussion about getting the best out of future meetings, as the attendance today was low with no obvious reason. Some members would prefer to use the full day allocated for meetings, others can only commit half a day at a time. We agreed to consider rotating the meeting days future meetings.

4. Progress from Last Time



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a. Developing the RAF's Profile with CRC

Defra would like CRC to do work nationally, but to also develop a role and link with RAF's and the RCC's and both work regionally and locally. Ken Roy is has left CRC to join Natural England. Graham Garbutt, CRC CEO, has taken over the role as North East lead.

b. Workplan

David has reviewed the workplan but there are no substantial changes to the content. All the activity is potentially subject to change because of the SNR and Local Government Reform, what happens in the region over the next couple of years and how NERAF fits in with those processes.

c. NE, NW and Y&H RAF's Working with the Northern Way – Uplands Inquiry

The project board on a joint initiative by NWRAF, YHRAF and NERAF is meeting shortly but the partners are waiting for guidance on how the inquiry will be taken forward. NERAF members will be happy to support and be involved in the enquiry. A brief will be circulated in due course.

5. Chairman's Report

a. Stakeholder Event : 9th April 2008

The purpose of the meeting is to bring together representatives from the rural stakeholder organisations to update on regional changes, to explore if they wish to work together to influence new structures and strategies, and if so how. It is hoped that the formal consultation guidance on the SNR will be published by 9th April. David, along with Frances Rowe (One North East), Hilary Knox (ANEC) and Yvonne Greenlay (as Bryan Rees is unavailable to represent GONE on that day) have all agreed to participate in and initiate a series of workshops. David has sent out the invitation to regional rural contacts.

b. Recommended Reading

Rural Advocate Report;
CRC Report on How Budget Should Work For Rural Areas;
National Rural Pathfinder Report;
Rural Services Network "Sustaining Rural Communities – Call for Action" report.

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Date of Next Meeting:

9.30 am – Wednesday 11th June @ GONE. The GO Secretariat will explore rotating the dates of future meetings.

**GO RAF Secretariat
Environment and Rural Team
25 March 2008**



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