

North East Rural Affairs Forum
11 January 2007, Citygate, Newcastle upon Tyne

Present: David Stewart (Chair) Ian Brown Norman Dunn
Jason Robinson-Gay John Littlefair David McKnight
Yvonne Greenlay (RAF Co-ordinator/Secretary)

Apologies: Bill Rowe, Jen Hall, Julia Lyford, Chris Kolek

(In attendance): John Bainton (Government Office for the North East)
David Lees (Defra, Team Leader, general structural
funds policy and structural funds programme manager)

RES presentation: Gillian Roll, Lee Walton, Frances Rowe, One NorthEast

1. Minutes and action points of previous meeting (3 October 2006)

Minutes accepted. Matters arising:

Citizen's Panel – Pilot arrangement underway in NW&NE England to make Brussels more accountable to 'real people' by taking key issues from Europe and 2/3 times a year allowing a panel to question expert witnesses (specialists) with findings being fed back to a conference in Brussels in late April. First residential for NW/NE panel held with NERAF represented by David McKnight. Phil Hughes is also an official NERAF panel member. Second residential scheduled for June.

Bureaucracy burdens on small businesses – intelligence suggests that the newly appointed Business Link contractor might, with others, be working towards putting regulation officers in place to help manage the issue. NERAF response to RES offered help in developing an end-user group.

Local Gov White Paper – The possibility of NERAF being asked to comment on unitary authority proposals was raised. In view of the impending deadline (end Jan) for plan submission it was considered unlikely that the Forum would be approached.

Action point: D Stewart, I Brown & Y Greenlay to consider (either following submission of plans or once LG&C decisions are announced) if Forum should offer an opinion or contribute to the consultation process following defra consideration of the proposals – expected in the spring.

2. NERAF local and national activity and related developments (discussions supported by activity log).

CRC/RAF Chairs relationship - D Stewart reported that at recent meeting of CRC board members and RAF chairs, Mark Shucksmith (northeast board member) voiced a strong drive to negotiate a progressive approach from both sides. Independent of any national agreements NERAF continues to benefit from a co-operative local relationship and access to Stuart Burgess the Rural Advocate.

Defra strategy re-fresh & GO Review – Recently Ministers were invited by departmental officials to consider whether 'rural' should remain within the

scope of Defra or be 'mainstreamed' within other departments' policies. Ministers preferred to leave things as they are for the time being at least but are keen to develop closer links with other departments to draw on their experience eg DLGC expertise in working with communities. In any event mainstreaming doesn't necessarily mean Defra losing responsibility for rural but may help address some concerns Ministers and others have such as measures for rural economy being different and isolated from those for urban economy, often with different PSA targets being applied. Whitehall generally favours fewer and more easily measured PSA targets with rural being an integral part of cross-departmental policy.

Competitive Spending Review (CSR) is due to report in the summer, leading to even greater uncertainty on policy and resources until then, although indicators suggest it will not impact on Defra's commitment to rural. NERAF's was invited by the North East Assembly to be part of discussions they were having with HMT re CSR07 in February.

Post Offices – Following the successful Post Office Subsidy workshop in November a proposal paper was sent to Barry Gardiner and Defra officials. Members were alerted to a CRC workshop on the future of rural post offices (25 Jan).

Annual Report – The purpose of the report is both to promote the Forum and for Defra and GO to use when challenged on NERAF's role and achievements. It will focus not only on the Forum's activities but on the effectiveness of its actions. Gordon Morris will prepare the copy based on discussions with Forum members and local organisations.

Action point: Report to be completed for circulation at the Rural Conference.

Action point: Communications Task Group to identify how best to promote and circulate report.

Visit by John Mills (Defra Director Rural Policy) 21/22 Feb - Invited by NERAF to see and hear first-hand what is happening in the region regarding the Forum, specific rural projects (estates pilot), issues affecting the region and how partners are working together. Programme to include opportunity for Forum members to meet him personally over lunch.

3. Forum project activity (Task Groups) update

Communications: Written update already circulated by I Brown. Key areas of activity are conference, stakeholder database, media training for members and use of syndicated articles.

RSCP: Written update already circulated by J Hall. External admin support secured. GO Communities Team and Defra team are on board with concept and scope of project. Original offer by P Hughes and D McKnight to play a role in Durham survey work to be followed up.

Action Point: P Hughes & D McKnight to make contact with J Hall.

Investigation & Research: Written update already circulated by J Lyford. Conclusion at meeting was that the additional information was useful and that the group should now consider a plan for taking things forward. Clear signal from Northumberland Strategic Partnership that they are willing to work with the Forum's Research Group to help facilitate and possibly even help resource a future research programme.

Action Point: D Stewart to liaise with J Lyford on how to take forward.

Rural Conference (Leadership task group): Members were fully briefed on key points of planning and encouraged to contribute to both arrangements for the conference and to specific roles on the day. Hoped-for outcomes and outputs for the day to include:

- Who are the leaders and who are the drivers.
- Giving people 'permission' to do what they feel is right but which they are currently restricted in doing.
- Greater empowerment

Action points: Members to promote conference to contacts and respond to organiser's requests to target specific groups to achieve the right audience balance. Members to undertake specific roles on the day as advised by conference organiser.

Rural procurement and survey into changing levels of local services – nothing further to report.

4. Operational issues

2007/08 Work plan: Reviewed at the meeting but no amendments made.

Action point: D Stewart/Y Greenlay to canvass members regarding topics they would be willing to lead on.

Responding to external contacts' requests for support: Maintaining the Forum's independence is vital and might be compromised by taking up other peoples' agendas. The Forum should not agree to endorse a specific course of action unless members have been directly involved in considering the evidence. All such requests will, in future, be circulated giving members the opportunity to assess whether the Forum should investigate further. Rather than commenting on the issue itself the Forum might usefully confine itself to highlighting the wider implications of the approach organisations/authorities are planning to adopt - eg whether that approach is likely to engage or alienate those directly involved.

Action point: NERAF Constitutional document to cover the Forum's position on handling approaches from external contacts.

5. Regional Economic Strategy (RES) Action Plan

Both the Forum and the RDA welcomed the opportunity for a frank discussion on the arguments supporting the RES Action Plan and how it could better reflect rural perspectives and needs. Members had already developed a draft response to the document which had been shared with the RDA presentation

team as an indication of the Forum's viewpoint and as a starting point for discussions.

Key points discussed:

- Partners accept that there is a recognised absence of **evidence** for rural issues but the fact that augments aren't supported by evidence doesn't make them less valid.
- The **whole of the RES is important to rural communities** not just the overt rural references. The RDA accepts there are still gaps (in what is still a draft document) and their rural team is working hard to ensure there are more and relevant rural references.
- **Business** Start-ups target looks too ambitious and relies on business Link delivering a 'fit for purpose' service. Also, many new rural start-ups will be micro-businesses which will not be VAT registered and won't feature in RDA's figures. Insufficient references to role of and support needed for established businesses – including those not meeting RDA's size and growth potential criteria. Need for RES to be mapped against RSS as latter could be a 'brake' on rural business growth and start-ups. Role of mentoring for micro-businesses and social enterprises is vital. Stakeholders must support RDA's efforts to upskill business advisers' understanding of rural working practices and conditions.
- Whilst accepting the principle of **bigger, more strategic** projects the RES should allow scope for smaller, longer output maturing projects. 'Bigger' projects need effective intermediaries to translate them into improvements to grassroot services

Action point: Written response to be revised and submitted.

Action point: I Brown to write to Jane Nolan (as NERAF link to NSP) to reinforce Forum's offer to Business Link to help develop a small focus group to 'proof' their approach.

Action point: NERAF to consider a future research project into assessing the benefits of longer-term (eg Leader+ style) projects, perhaps using limited amount of funding to employ a researcher.

6. Recruitment

A paper with recommendations for a future exercise designed to expand current membership and support the formation of thematic groups had been circulated to members before the meeting. There were no objections to its recommendations.

Action point: Characteristics of membership (skills, qualities, length of appointment etc) to be incorporated into NERAF constitutional document.

Action point: Recruitment exercise to be undertaken in line with the papers' recommendations, focussing on the personal qualities as well as the background of the candidates to help achieve a mix that will help the Forum achieve workplan outputs as well as wider outcomes.

7. Natural England – Introductory discussions with Martyn Howat, Regional Director.

The session was designed to explore how the Forum and Natural England might best work together. Nationally, the organisation has approx 2500 staff and a £500m budget (much of which is linked with existing rural and environmental land schemes) and its interests are centred on those agencies associated with wildlife, people and landscape. Forum members were keen to explore Nat England's rational and ambitions for their involvement in rural activities and communities and the extent and nature of their participation. The agency acknowledged that so far its activities have largely been developed without the direct input of rural customers however it is keen to address this. It hopes to develop new ways of generating ideas and mechanisms for wide stakeholder engagement that could lead to greater ownership at grassroots level of its future strategies and activities. M Howat expressed a willingness to hold future discussions with the Forum on this point. Forum members would also welcome the opportunity to contribute to any strategic dialogues where a customer perspective would be useful.

Action point: Natural England to be invited to a future meeting to discuss in more detail their plans for end-user and other stakeholder engagement and how NERAF can support or inform those plans. Discussions also to cover any structures which the agency is aware of which NERAF could usefully be stitched into to help challenge or contribute to the dialogue on statutory or non-statutory developments.

8. Shared Intelligence and feedback.

Norman Dunn confirmed his recent appointment to the Exec Board of Community Action Northumberland (formerly Rural Community Council for Northumberland).

This was John Bainton's last NERAF meeting before retiring from GONE. He wished to formally thank the Forum members for their work, enthusiasm and success over the previous 18 months and for operating in the independent and challenging way that he had envisaged the Forum would. Members expressed their gratitude to John for the considerable support he had shown them.

9. Any other business. None

10. Date of next meeting. Dates to be circulated

Yvonne Greenlay