



Independent

NORTH EAST RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM

Championing the interests of rural communities

WEDNESDAY 12 DECEMBER 2007 - GALLOWGATE, GONE

MEETING NOTE

Attendees:

NERAF members:

David Stewart (Chair)		Ian Brown (Vice-Chair)	
Lesley Allen	Fiona Chesters	Ruth Dent	Barbara Armstrong
Patrick Lavery	Jen Hall	Dagmar Winter	John Littlefair

Observers and guests:

Elaine Inglis & Rachel Ford - Business Link North East
Sue Bevan – Northumberland Strategic Partnership

Secretarial team:

Yvonne Greenlay & Claire Scott – Government Office North East

Apologies:

David McKnight – Forum Member
Norma Foster – Forum Member
Julia Lyford – Forum Member

1. Introductions

David Stewart opened the meeting by welcoming all the members to the group and noted that we have a good geographical spread of members since the NERAF recruitment exercise in the summer which will mean we should be more effective in getting our voices heard as a collective Forum in the region.

He also welcomed Sue Bevan from the Northumberland Strategic Partnership (NSP) to the Forum meeting. Sue was invited to the Forum to talk to the members about support for local communities on FMD and Bluetongue. The members all agreed they were very happy for Sue to contribute her views to the general discussion throughout the day.

Ian Brown will be retiring as Vice-Chair of the Forum in June. An internal election ballot to recruit a replacement will be needed before then. This is ideal because David's term as Chair doesn't end until summer (08) so the Chair and Vice-Chair appointed will be staggered to give continuity of appointment.



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2. Theme for the Meeting

The main theme of this meeting was for the members to have a good understanding of what is going on regionally and nationally and to consider how the Forum can, or should, best respond to those issues. The meeting would focus on three issues specifically:

- a) Rural proofing;
- b) Minimum service standards in rural communities (eg post-offices);
- c) Development of formal NERAF links with sub-regional partnerships.

3. Matters arising from the last meeting and “hot topics”

a) Rural Board (Yvonne Greenlay)

A rural governance structure was established in response to Defra’s 2004 Rural Strategy which required government offices to bring together those delivery organisations which form the Defra family. Groups were set up operating at three levels - Strategic, Executive and Working. In spring 2007 the administration of the whole structure transferred from GO to the Assembly. The Strategic group assumed the role of a Shadow Rural Board with the plan that the membership be expanded and broadened via an open recruitment exercise. Before this could happen however various policy changes occurred - in particular the SNR - which impacted on the Assembly and others partners’ approach to rural service delivery.

In response a task & finish group was set up to consider what governance structure might best support rural partner agencies and the communities that they assist. That group met in mid-December with an expectation that the “who”, “what” and “how” tasks for the new board would be developed by the end of January 2008. Rural Board members (assuming it continues) will be at Chief Executive level so it has the necessary power to deliver and influence. It is anticipated that the Rural Board will work alongside NERAF.

b) Communications Group (Yvonne Greenlay)

David and Norma were unable to attend the NERAF meeting but had previously met with members of the Go Sec team to talk about their aims for the communications group. The key aim of the group is to improve the Forum’s communications – to make them smoother, more effective and targeted including how to engage with the wider community. A short (roughly 3 page) communication



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strategy will be produced and circulated for endorsement by the wider Forum membership. The strategy will give a clear idea about what members could realistically achieve and how to position the Forum in the region. The group will take responsibility for developing the existing conference website including a mechanism for seeking views of the wider community and the annual report which is a Defra requirement and indication of how the GONE Secretariat funding has been utilised..

c) IRF

Forum members - (Dagmar. Lesley) and Yvonne had taken Steve Brooker's (NEA) offer at the last NERAF meeting to look at the IRF consultation document to consider where they thought it could be improved from a rural perspective. It was evident that there were few references to rural and that NERAF was right to try to address this through the consultation process.

The IRF will be re-drafted in the light of the consultation process and a paper will go to the Sustain Board in February with final version published in March.

The Forum members considered that Steve had been receptive to their views though there was no guarantee of whether they would influence the final framework document at a higher level. The Forum accepted that it is difficult to take on board all comments and priorities from the very wide ranging set of regional backgrounds.

d) RDPE (Rural Development Programme for England) Leader (Ruth Dent)

The Leader panel met in November to carry out the first sift of the expressions of interest that had been received under the programme. Several of the expressions of interest met the criteria and have been asked to submit full applications. 20 May has been set for the final assessment stage and Ruth will form part of the panel.

The Forum agreed that it would be happy to give support to organisations who have submitted bids, to help them rural proof them or help them with their delivery plans. In particular, Patrick Lavery, who has considerable experience as an adviser to the EU in a previous role, would like to offer support to bidders should they need it.



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4. Current Issues

a) GP Services (Dagmar Winter)

There have been wide-spread newspaper articles and reports about the problems with funding within the Northumberland Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the detrimental effect that will have on GP's surgeries in the Northumberland area. The rationale appears to be based on the fact that the ratio of GP surgeries in Northumberland is greater than the rest of the PCT region.

Local meetings have been held and some reports suggest surgeries may close leading to an extremely high level of concern from the residents in the area. In response, the county's four MPs have met to consider how to deal with this issue and Parish Council Chairs for Northumberland are also investigating whether they should put together a pressure group to respond to the proposed changes.

Forum members in Durham and Tees Valley agreed that they need to keep an eye on what is happening as their PCT's aren't in financially secure situations either and they may well find themselves facing similar situations. They might usefully consider what mechanism might be needed to collect evidence and decide how best to lobby should it happen in their own geographical areas, in the near future

With no clear evidence that the PCT's proposals had been rural proofed the Forum agreed to a number of actions to lobby for change. David will also approach CRC to enlist their support. Sue Bevan to raise with NSP Well-Being sector group.

b) Update on FMD

Following a meeting initiated by the NSP, John Litherland (its Exec Dir) wrote to all the agencies in November alerting them to the visible economic and social impact on FMD on rural businesses and communities in Northumberland and inviting them to work with the NSP and others in the region to address the issues set out in their position statement.

Forum members then gave an update on what they still see as the ongoing critical issues & indications of stress in relation to the FMD outbreak. Points covered included:



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- For hill-farmers the selling price for breeding lambs have dropped by 35-40%, and for fat lambs by 33%;
- Hay and straw prices have increased by 20%;
- Concentrated feed prices have risen by 30%;
- Hay and silage is poor quality, but this is due to the bad weather rather than a direct effect of FMD;
- The single farm payment will have a higher modulation and the payment has been delayed;
- There has been an increase in the use of the services of UTASS;
- Sheep that have been bred for a particular market but haven't been sold because of restrictions on movements, have missed the market opportunity and are now stuck on the hill-sides;
- Lost business due to exporting and movement restrictions;
- Welfare and economical issues – it is more costly for a farmer to dispose of dead stock than live stock;
- Farmers support agencies are getting many more calls;
- In some areas (eg Berwick) the industry is managing to absorb the problems so far.

The Forum agreed that although there are on-going problems that the farming industry still needs help with. Unfortunately there is no hard evidence with which to influence government bodies. There is a strong feeling of time-bomb ticking on farmer's financial situations. At present costs are being borne by the farmers themselves, but this is dependant on their relationship with their bank. There is still frustration over different, more flexible arrangements being put in place in Scotland and Wales.

c) Bluetongue

In Holland it took a couple of years for Bluetongue to become established so the UK is likely to see problems in the next two years. It is hoped that with the mild weather over the winter the midges will die off but this didn't happen on the continent so it is unlikely to happen here in the UK.

d) Business Link North East (BLNE) – Elaine Inglis and Rachel Ford

Elaine and Rachel had been invited to talk to the Forum about how we can work together to support local communities in relation to specific problems such as the impact of FMD and more generally like reducing the burden of regulation for rural businesses.



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BLNE are in the process of recruiting three specialist Rural Advisers who have a strong rural background that will be able to offer sound business advice to farmers who may seek their help under the programme of activity. Two of the advisers will be in post by Christmas and the third in January.

Elaine explained that BLNE has been working with the One NorthEast to take forward the package of funding that was made available to farmers to address the impact of FMD in the region. The scheme has been set up specifically to help farmers affected by FMD and allowed for 100% funding but there has been very little take-up.

Having heard from BLNE it appeared that the guidelines attached to the funding streams impose severe restrictions and do not match the needs of farmers. BLNE claim to be acting simply as the conduit for the fund not having developed the criteria for the programme however they will be taking on board all the feedback from the farming community about where the scheme is lacking with a view to encouraging One North East to review the guidelines. Attempts so far have been unsuccessful.

The Forum agreed that there is a need for a process for lobbying in the future (whether it is the Business Link, RDA or Defra), to encourage those agencies to be more flexible when devising funding regimes rather than having ones that work against the interests of the farming industry.

The Forum Chair reiterated his previous offer to set up a focus group to help BLNE develop their advice service and in others ways including advice on targeting and criteria setting for financial support packages; helping with rural advisor interviews; explaining to senior BLNE managers just how rural communities work.

BLNE have been in discussion with a range of stakeholders and as part of their Corporate Plan hope to develop a series of MOUs. It is possible that this will be the route followed to formalise their relationship with NERAF.

e) Reducing Regulatory Burdens

There are things that could very easily be implemented that would have a positive impact on reducing the burden of regulation on rural industry but NERAF does not have the authority to effect change. The Forum sees the



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setting up a joint focus group, based around the suite of rural businesses within the Kirkharle Courtyard project and BLNE advisors, as a possible mechanism for coming up with innovative ideas which can then be fed into the national mechanism that already exists.

f) Local Area Agreements, LSPs and Sub-Regional Partnerships – David Stewart.

The CRC 2007 Rural Proofing Report

<http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/publications/crc52monitoringruralproofing2007> says that rural proofing isn't always happening. CRC helpfully developed (and included at Annex 1 to their report) a good practice framework offering a simple workable approach to use.

David proposed NERAF members consider a standard set of questions when they are asked to provide advice or a rural view-point :

1. *Did you consider the needs of the community. If so what did it tell you?*
2. *Is there an impact and if so is this positive or negative?*
3. *After considering needs and looking at impact has something changed to reflect and respond to it*
4. *Have you /will you be evaluating the outcome.*

Members were happy to adopt this approach.

g) Rural Community Minimum Standards – David Stewart

David had developed a questionnaire for NERAF to use to consider what members would expect as a minimum service (on education, health, community facilities and transport) in rural areas. Additions to the list were invited – these included crematoriums, waste management, care homes for the elderly, community care, police, broad band provision, libraries, youth services, transport (community transport) and access to volunteering.

Members agreed to augment the list with ideas or examples of how services might, or already are, being developed or sustained. Based on this the questionnaire will be developed for use alongside the rural proofing toolkit discussed earlier in the meeting.



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Sue Bevan pointed out that NSP Rural Group is currently revisiting its rural services analysis work and that there may be an opportunity for a useful dialogue with NERAF.

5. Developing NERAF's role re changes in the region, local rural governance, Single Integrated Regional Strategy and Local Government Review – discussion led by Ian Brown

Various national, regional and local changes impinge on NERAF's role and position including:

- Possibility of Defra relinquishing responsibility for RAFs to allow them to become more closely linked with CRC.
- Comprehensive Spending review which has (and will continue to) impact regionally.
- Elections in May 08 in advance of moves in Durham and N'land to unitary status by April 09.
- Some, but not all, of future 12 LAs are currently represented on RDA Board. How will this apparent inconsistency be resolved?
- Political power shift away from North East Assembly to RDA gathering momentum. Amongst other issues, how to retain experience and competence of NEA personnel in the region?
- Sub-national review. RDA is committed to new role - effects of which are just starting to show, No feel at time for LA's view on their extra responsibilities under SNR legislation
- SNR likely to alter the type of work undertaken by RDA at higher levels and lead to more work and authority being devolved to sub-regions and LAs. Will also see shift in scrutiny function to LAs. Wait to see how that will be organised and if NERAF can play a part.
- RDA now not only has social and economic roles but will increasingly take on spatial planning and housing responsibilities. How will this work out?

NERAF will need to work more cleverly to decide on those opportunities where it could have the greatest influence and form relationships with Sub-regional Partnership's (SRPs) to take forward and identify how it develops as a Forum whose views are listened to and respected.



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6. NERAF activities – David Stewart

a) Relationships With SRPs – David Stewart

Agreement had already been reached at an earlier meeting to develop formal links with SRPs and so David had approached certain members to build that role. David will make the initial introductory phone call to the contacts in all three areas and will broker the first meeting on behalf of the members. He will also prepare a written brief for the three leads on their role and what NERAF would like to do..

Patrick Lavery will lead on discussion with NSP on behalf of the Northumberland members. Barbara Armstrong will lead on Durham and will make contact with Durham Strategic Partnership, chaired by Phil Hughes. Fiona Chesters and John Littlefair will handle the relationship for Tees Valley via contact with the Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit . Absent members to cooperate with arrangements.

b) Robin Mortimer visit – 7 February

David is keen to create the environment for this senior civil servant and his colleagues to meet with as many real rural people as possible as well as representatives of regional and sub-regional organisations. The aim is to have all the NERAF members present with some cross-over at lunch.

c) Proposals for short consultation exercises

Members were given brief outlines of possible projects. Further details would be added before circulating them to members for comment and authority to proceed.

Date of the Next Meeting:

Wednesday 12 March 2007 : Government Office North East

Wednesday 11 June 2007 : Government Office North East

Secretariat Team
GO Environment & Rural Team

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