

East of England Rural Forum

Wednesday 18th March 2009

The Salings Millennium Hall, Great Saling, Braintree,
Essex, CM7 5DW



East of England Rural Forum

Minutes

Attendees

John Barker
Alan Bullivant
George Courtauld
Jim Gledhill
Brian Hayes
Adam Lavis
Stuart Pile
Colin Robertshaw
John Yates

Francis Bedding
David Burch
Nicola Currie
Anne-Marie Hamilton
Pat Holtom
Corinne Meakins
Emma Powlett
Philip Wilson

Ed Bennett
Martin Collison
Pam Forbes
Suzanne Harris
Jasmine Joolia
John Mullen
Sarah Prentice
David Wood

Apologies

Andrew Allen
John Buchanan
John Goodwin
Graham Hedger
Nicola Lloyd
Mike Render
Cindy Winn

Kirsten Bennett
Jonathan Burney
Ed Gregory
Sarah Hughes
Peter Medhurst
Judith Watson
Richard Woolley

Andrew Budden
Kevin Davis
Philip Hayes
Edward Iveagh
Mick Page
Hazel Williams

Speakers

Marie Francis (Chair of SFFS)
Mick Carr (GO-East)
Caroline Seaman (Norfolk NHS)
Elizabeth Rouse (Tesco)

1. Welcome - John Yates

John Yates welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Minutes and Matters Arising

The minutes of the meeting held on 12th December 2008 were agreed as an accurate record.

John reported that the position papers, the EERF's main way of influencing, had been sent to Ministers, other departments and regional bodies. Acknowledgement and feedback had been received from EEDA, the Minister for the Natural and Marine Environment, Wildlife and Rural Affairs and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS).

3. Written reports from Sub Groups

The EERF noted the written reports from the Learning and Skills and Housing Sub-Groups that had been circulated prior to the meeting.

4. Report from RRAF Chairs / Minister meeting

John reported that the RRAF Chairs had met with the Minister on 16th February. Defra's expectation of the RAFs is that they will continue to contribute to the national picture; to rural proof; and to work with the CRC.

The CRC will launch a new rural proofing toolkit at an event in May which will then be rolled out. The EERF expressed concern that the event is very expensive to attend.

The Minister is keen to increase the quality of engagement with the RAFs and he intends to visit the regions. The visits will focus on access to services, housing and the economic downturn. John reported that the Minister has a particular interest in how rural messages are communicated in the regions – the EERF has a lot of evidence of this.

The Minister would like to have discussions with the RAF Chairs on the following, with feed in from the RAFs:

- how 'rural' has been / can be played into the Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration (SNR);
- how RAFs are engaging with the new structures including Regional Ministers; and how they feed into other Departments – something that the EERF is already doing;
- the SNR and rural poverty.

John felt that the Minister sees the EERF as proactive and its thematic meetings and position papers are a good approach. The report of the EERF conference, around how rural areas can respond to the economic downturn, will be fed to Defra and the CRC and subsequently up to the National Economic Council.

The EERF raised the following questions and key points:

- Do the RAF Chairs talk with the Minister – is there a two-way conversation – or does the discussion take place with officials?
- The Minister's constituency includes both urban and rural areas. He is genuinely interested and listens to the Chairs – his willingness to come out to the regions is unique.
- Regional bodies and groups such as the CLA, NFU and SFFS Groups have found it extremely difficult to engage with the Regional Minister, although she did attend a Regional Transport Forum meeting. John Yates agreed to raise with the Rural Minister the issues surrounding the Regional Ministers. Kate Belinis reported that she will feedback the EERF's concerns to the Regional Minister. Colin Robertshaw agreed to raise this at a Partnership meeting on EERF's behalf.
- Rural proofing is not a 'tick box' exercise and should happen at the design stage of new policies.
- The high cost of attending the launch event might prevent some regions from attending and is inappropriate in the current economic climate. John Yates agreed to write to the Minister regarding the EERF's views on the cost of attending the event.
- The event is intended to be a national launch for national policy makers, however it will filter down to sub-national level and the CRC is keen to talk to the EERF about how best to do this.

ACTION: John Yates to raise the issues with the Rural Minister surrounding the Regional Minister.

ACTION: Kate Belinis to feedback the EERF's concerns to the Regional Minister about her engagement in the region.

ACTION: Colin Robertshaw to raise the issues around the Regional Minister's engagement at a

Partnership meeting on EERF's behalf.

ACTION: John Yates to write to the Minister regarding the EERF's views on the cost of attending the CRC's rural proofing toolkit launch event.

5. Launch of revamped website and the 2009/10 Action Plan

The revamped EERF website is now live and the EERF thanked Emma Powlett for all her work on it. It is intended to be a two-way communication tool and the EERF was encouraged to submit material for inclusion. Those that had looked at the new site reported that it is much improved and more accessible.

The Action Plan for 2009/10 has been circulated to EERF members and is on the website.

ACTION: EERF members to publicise the revamped website to their constituencies and networks.

6. "Food Security"

John introduced the session. Food Security will affect everyone, and the Forum could have a key role to play.

7. Presentation of Revised Action Plan for Food and Farming from SSFG

Martin Collison explained the need for a refresh of the region's Sustainable Food and Farming Action Plan. He also highlighted the challenges of Food Security – an increase in production with less environmental impacts using less water, energy and waste.

The new action plan is due to be signed off by partners and stakeholders on 24th April.

The following questions were raised and comments made:

- There were concerns of the knock on effect of the Severn Barrage, with compensatory habitat being considered in this region.
- R&D support should be independent, and have no vested interest.

8. Update on Food Security

Marie Francis gave the background to issues around Food Security. As a result of this, food is a far higher priority for Government. The Food and Drink Industry is a major contributor to the region's economy.

Some key issues arising from the work carried out so far included:

- The need for more R&D. The region has a world class R&D base, and we should find out how to exploit it better.
- London needs to be supplied with food, and the East of England is ideally placed to help this happen.
- Large scale production/supply is important.
- Skills improvement is needed across the workforce, including higher level skills.
- There is a need to work together to achieve an increase in production with a lessened environmental impact.

9. Update on Defra Food Policy Review

Mick Carr explained the Government's recent Food Policy work, aiming to achieve a vision for a sustainable food system. A large scale consultation is taking place, and the regional SFFS groups have already engaged with Defra about how regions can influence this work.

10. Food and Health Action Network

Caroline Seaman expressed the importance of food and nutrition in health. The increase in levels of obesity has raised food in health priorities. Inappropriate nutrition is responsible for a number of health problems in addition to obesity, including cancer and heart disease. The main problems in addressing this include:

- Lack of a food culture in the UK.
- Access to and availability of fresh food.
- Skills in food preparation and cooking are low.
- There are significant food inequalities across the region.

11. Accessing Local Food – the role of the supermarkets.

Elizabeth Rouse explained Tesco's local food policy. Pork and poultry were sourced entirely from the region, with root crops, potatoes and brassicas mainly sourced from here. Tesco has increased the number of local lines in stores across the country and works closely with suppliers to provide distribution solutions.

12. Q and A

A discussion followed during which the following points were made:

- What does Tesco mean by 'distribution solutions'? Where are local foods packed?
- There are two fresh depots in Peterborough and Harlow so fresh produce is packed and stored in the region.
- Many businesses have issues with the planning system. One of the CLA's core roles is around influencing and they have done a lot of work on rural proofing planning.
- Red tape and the planning system are barriers that prevent farmers from going into vacant shops in deprived areas; but economic regeneration and working through Local Area Agreements is the way forward as there is a need to boost the economy in deprived areas.
- There is confusion about what people should and should not eat and affordability of food is an issue. There needs to be a cultural and behavioural change to encourage people to eat more healthily.
- There is a definite role for the region to influence national debate. The SFFS Groups are developing a position paper on food and agriculture and they will consult during the year, particularly through breakfast meetings at the county shows. The paper will be used to feed into national policy. There are gaps in departmental knowledge but they are open to receiving positive workable solutions from the local level.
- There is a danger that if an issue is packaged as 'rural' it is marginalised by regional and national bodies. There could be potential in bringing together the different sectors so that we can discuss the issues with Government with a single voice – a regional voice will be powerful. There is also a need to engage better with the other political parties and with Europe.
- The Government's 5% set aside proposal for England only is at odds with the positive tone of the presentations.
- Supply of food is an issue, with London only having three days' worth of food at any one time, and the impact that adverse weather has on the ability of schools to feed their pupils etc. Investment in infrastructure is very important although it is not currently done very well.
- Although the EERF does not have a seat at the Regional Partnership Group, the issue should be put to them for debate. The EERF will support and feed into the SFFS Groups' position paper, which will then be put to the Regional Partnership Group later in the year.

ACTION: Colin Robertshaw and Corinne Meakins to liaise about how best to raise the EERF's

issues around food and farming at a Regional Partnership Group meeting.

13. Forum AGM

John opened the AGM and thanked everyone for coming.

14. Review of the year – the Annual Report; Questions from the floor

- John thanked the vice-chairs and GO-East for their support over the year.
- Theme papers had been delivered in the year and are on the web-site. These had been put to Government, together with regional partners and stakeholders.
- Communications strategy had been developed.
- Ideas from the recent conference on the economic downturn were to be developed in the coming year.
- Themes for future meetings have been formulated.

15. Election: Open floor questions to Chair and Vice Chair candidates

There were no questions for chair or vice chairs.

16. Casting of votes

Nominations had been sought before the meeting, and three had been received. Sarah Prentice oversaw the casting of votes. John Yates was re-elected as Chair, with Pat Holtom and Suzanne Harris as Vice Chairs. There were no votes against.

17. Any Other Business

John explained the change in support to the EERF, with GO-East opting out of the secretariat and coordination roles and Rural Action East taking over from 1 April.

Sarah Prentice and Mick Carr
GO-East
April 2009