

REGIONAL RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM CHAIRS MEETING
THURSDAY 13 NOVEMBER 2008
ROOM 806 NOBEL HOUSE

Attendees:

David Stewart	NERAF
John Yates	EERF
Douglas Chalmers	NWRAF
Graham Ward	YHRAF
Steve Parsons	SWRAF
Jeremy Leggett	Rural Forum for the South East
Paul Bettison	South East Rural Board
Graham Garbutt	CRC
Laura Jacobs	CRC
Roger Wilshaw	CLG

Huw Irranca-Davies	Minister
Will Pryer	Defra
Ron Scrutton	Defra
Tony Williamson	Defra
Sean Crawford	Defra
Robin Barnett	Defra

Apologies:

Nick Read	WMRAF
Geoff Stevens	EMRAF
Jack Ellerby	NWRAF

<p>Introductions and Minister's opening remarks</p> <p><i>Huw Irranca Davies</i></p>	<p>The Minister introduced himself to the group – he wants frank communication around a shared agenda. He noted his interest in articulating what we mean by rural mainstreaming, and wants combined efforts to make it work better. He confirmed that he is keen to hear from the Chairs about common themes, issues and concerns of relevance to rural delivery.</p> <p>David Stewart responded on behalf of the RRAFs – he identified a key challenge in building the RAF Chairs, Defra colleagues and the Minister into an effective and productive group – and in the face of a changing rural world in which the Sub National Review and the rural mainstreaming agenda are rapidly taking hold. The challenge is how to join it all up.</p>
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	<p>David and the RRAF Chairs set some of the context for RRAF activity and these meetings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of the Sub National Review is of great interest; • Whilst Defra/CRC focus on the national picture, the Chairs want to hear from the Minister what SNR means for the regions; • RRAF Chairs seek Ministerial steers to help them be more useful as a group; • Concerns for local/regional issues that may not necessarily also be national issues (for example, very high unemployment in the north east); • Worrying perceptions in regions of over-reliance on urban perspectives in understanding and solving rural needs; • The Chairs role in providing a balance between high level evidence and what's happening on the ground; • Common concerns were cited: post office closures, affordable housing and the downturn in the economy being major current issues.
<p>Getting to know you – key regional rural issues</p> <p><i>David Stewart, NERAF, and RRAF Chairs</i></p>	<p>RRAF Chairs were invited to round up their regional perspectives and issues for the Minister's information:</p> <p>North East</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence is a big issue, especially as we move towards implementation of the Sub-National Review – there is a danger of the public sector ignoring problems due to a lack of evidence. <p>East of England</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coastal erosion; climate change; flood plain development; growth agenda/sustainable communities and increasing urbanisation; loss of rural services; East of England is the driest region. • Continuum across the region from areas proximal to London, to more remote areas: e.g. Cambridge is affluent and connected , but 20 miles away are areas of serious deprivation. • EERF approach to its work: debating chamber, with thematic focus for each meeting, with an aim to link discussion strategically rather than focussing on isolated local issues. <p>South West</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migrant workers: large number of migrant workers in region – language skills inadequate and level of funding for language training is not enough. However, evidence that migrant workers are going home – with resulting changing employment patterns; • Affordable housing: need to redefine what we mean by 'affordable'. Average earnings in SW are below national average, although current economic downturn has not impacted too much in the rural SW; • Fuel poverty another big issue – linked to below average earnings.

<p><i>The New Uplands ELS</i></p>	<p>North West</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable housing, fuel poverty, migrant workers, uplands communities, and access to affordable, effective broadband; • Migrant workers starting to return home – what are impacts of changing employment patterns? Are there issues with cultural integration of different migrant workers (non-white, non-Christian); • Downturn in uplands – they are not empty landscapes, need economic growth – signs of suffering in wake of last year’s FMD outbreak. <p>South East</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newly formed RAF that has met once – involves rural local strategic partners and is local government oriented. • 25% of SE population live in rural areas. • Main economic driver is proximity to London. • Concerns about loss of young (15-30) people , and dramatic demographic change resulting in increasing isolation and poverty for the elderly (the old getting older, and young leaving). • Local government is struggling financially to provide, particularly maintaining effective rural transport. • Broadband availability needs to be taken more seriously: those without broadband are unable to be involved in broadband-based government business. <p>Yorkshire & the Humber</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flooding is a major issue in parts of the region, and in particular threat of flash flooding; • Protection from and dealing with climate change; • ‘Uplands issues’, and the difficulty for farmers with subsidy to also do landscape work; wants new approach to provision of landscape-based public goods, other than through farming by skewing agricultural subsidies; • The struggle to convince all at parish level of the empowerment debate; • Concerns that disadvantage remains hidden by aggregated data. <p>The Minister commented on broadband provision and digital inclusion: explaining his view that more than state intervention is needed, and that the private sector has an important role. He believes that <i>appropriate</i> speeds must be available to all.</p> <p>The Minister also mentioned that he is working through the fine details with an aim to see the vast majority of upland farmers involved in the scheme. He believes this is possible but there may be some tough calls to make.</p>
<p>Transforming Places <i>Roger Wilshaw, CLG</i></p>	<p>Roger Wilshaw provided an overview of the Transforming Places consultation, which closed on 31 October, outlining the objectives of the proposals, which aim to reshape the way that regeneration is undertaken in England.</p>

	<p>Transforming Places was intended to set a strong regeneration framework. It includes proposals aimed at devolving powers to identify and address problems in the most significantly deprived places.</p> <p>Roger noted that feedback has been received from some rural interests raising concerns that choosing priority places based on IMD in full risks ignoring rural deprivation and the 80% of deprived people who do not live in deprived places.</p> <p>The CRC observed that policy and delivery initiatives to address regeneration (i.e. the Working Neighbourhoods Fund) are often urban biased – using evidence of concentrations of disadvantage which ignores dispersed rural need. It also noted that devolution can only work if funding is devolved as well as ‘power’: we need to have enough trust to move funding further down the delivery line.</p> <p>The Chairs responded with various points in the discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a widely held belief that Transforming Places is an overwhelmingly urban centric policy which has not been adequately rural proofed; • Concerns that Transforming Places is aimed at localities with total collapses of employment – which would not include rural places; • Failure of Transforming Places to address the real place-based needs of rural people through adequate people-focussed benefits; • There is a failure to join up amongst deliverers around this agenda. <p>The Minister thanked Roger for his presentation, and the chairs for their comments. He commented that it is important to recognise that the Transforming Places agenda is only one part of a wider basket of regeneration initiatives (some of which may tackle some of the issues raised by the Chairs).</p>
<p>CRC and RRAF relationship and mainstreaming</p> <p><i>Graham Garbutt</i></p>	<p>Graham Garbutt provided a round-up of CRC activity and priority issues for the Minister and RRAF Chairs.</p> <p>Housing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRC have published ‘The Big Picture’ which looked at planning for sustainable communities; • CRC are working with Matthew Taylor and others around forming a new consensus on what is meant by sustainable communities: including making the most of local assets, and communities being involved in their own shaping and planning. • Working on transport and technologies which shape communities needs; • Working with new Homes and Communities Agency (Rural Lead Director is Colin Motton) on incorporating rural effectively into their work; <p>Rural economy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is an area of great concern, and CRC are working with stakeholders to understand what is happening at regional levels, as well as with business

	<p>representatives and leaders;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRC are in talks with the British Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses regarding the impact of the credit crunch, and the looming threat of a rural recession. They will discuss all related issues, including taxation and employment regulations; • Undertaking work on following up the Rural Advocates report on rural economies; • CRC are planning three rural summits: and will be in touch with Defra Ministers about involvement. Summits will look at opportunities to generate more from the rural economy, focussing on innovation, investment and capacity. <p>Sub-National Review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRC working on this, and noted that RRAFs should be involved in rural proofing Integrated Regional Strategies. <p>LAA process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRC looking at LAA targets as part of examining the 'key architecture' of the LAA process; • Key challenge identified as advocating 'rural' in the face of resource cuts – a solution is to involve Regional Ministers more actively in this. <p>Other activity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRC worked on Darzi Review <p>Action:</p> <p>CRC to circulate Roger Turner's paper on the economic downturn when finalised.</p> <p>Defra to explore with HID involvement of Regional Ministers in advocating 'rural' (i.e. as part of LAA process).</p>
<p>Close and Minister's issues</p>	<p>The Minister summarised his thoughts from the meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The meeting was very useful to him, and he recognises the value of the group; • He is interested in using these meetings as a sounding board; • Recognises that SNR is a big issue, nationally and regionally, to be tackled; • Wants to think about how to articulate local/regional rural proofing; • He believes we haven't yet got the narrative around rural mainstreaming right; <p>The Minister went to on to say that he would be setting some 'homework' for the Chairs – to consider how we can both jointly and separately articulate mainstreaming and rural proofing.</p> <p>There followed a discussion of future meeting topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sub-National Review • IT, broadband and digital inclusion • Rural mainstreaming narratives • Using Regional Ministers to advocate rural • Empowerment (suggested by David Stewart)

	<p>Action:</p> <p>Minister to write to RRAF Chairs confirming 'homework'.</p>
Future meeting dates	<p>Forthcoming meetings will take place on the following:</p> <p>Thursday 12 February 2009</p> <p>Thursday 14 May 2009</p>