

RRAF Chairs Meeting

17 September 2008

The Low Wood Hotel, Windermere, Cumbria

Attendees:

Jonathan Shaw MP	Defra Rural Affairs Minister
David Miller	Private Secretary
Ron Scrutton	Defra, Deputy Director – Rural Policy
Tony Williamson	Defra
Sean Crawford	Defra
Robin Barnett	Defra
David Stewart	NERAF
Dagmar Winter	NERAF
David Collier	WMRAF
Pam Smith	EMRAF
John Yates	EERF
Graham Ward	YHRAF
Jeremy Leggett	SERAF
Jack Ellerby	NWRAF
Neil Cumberlidge	GONW
Graham Garbutt	Commission for Rural Communities
Crispin Moor	Commission for Rural Communities
Allan Williams	Action for Communities in Rural England
Stan Collins	South Lakeland DC (representing Local Government Association)

<p>Minister's Update</p> <p><i>Jonathan Shaw MP</i></p>	<p>Jonathan Shaw started by thanking the Chairs who will be stepping down,. He also encouraged the Chairs to continue letting him know what they wanted to discuss and get out of these meetings.</p> <p><u>Draft Legislative Programme consultation</u></p> <p>Jonathan Shaw began by thanking the Chairs for their submissions in response to the consultation on the draft legislative programme. He noted some of the consistent themes which came out of the Chairs' input – housing, rural proofing, and rural mainstreaming. He confirmed that the Chairs' input into legislative development has already had an effect – for example, their involvement in many discussions about affordable rural housing.</p> <p>There was some discussion about empowerment, and Jonathan Shaw pointed out that by publishing a draft Legislative Programme for consultation, the Government ensured that people were better informed, and thus empowered. The exercise also ensured that legislative activity</p>
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has a better fit with the country's institutions, has involved grassroots organisations in debates, and has helped the government do its work more effectively.

Further discussion ensued, in which the following points were made:

- Involve the community even earlier in policy development;
- RRAF involvement useful as a lever for rural voice;
- Strongest elements of rural community empowerment missed in LP which is urban biased;
- Need consultation not just on legislative development, but also statutory instruments;
- Views expressed that the LP could be even more ambitious.

Overall, the Chairs were grateful for opportunity to be involved in the process.

Energy Saving Programme/food and fuel

Jonathan Shaw mentioned the importance of RRAFs involvement in ensuring that rural customers can take advantage of the Government's new Energy Saving Programme. The Chairs explained that clearer guidance on what help/advice is available would be useful, and Jonathan Shaw agreed to write to the Chairs with some detail on the programme and where to seek advice.

Several points were made during discussion:

- Chairs were positive about the Programme, but felt that there is an urgent bottom-line, that people simply cannot afford fuel this winter – availability of hard cash is a problem for many, and Chairs expressed concern that there will be deaths this winter as a result;
- Great variability in ways that energy companies deliver benefits of the programme;
- Reaching the hardest to reach is key – for example, cultural factors amongst the elderly reduce their willingness to spend money on staying warm; energy saving interventions must be designed to reach these people;
- Defra is working with DWP on targeting groups who don't access benefits, and will inform the Chairs of progress in this work;
- Providing help to finance insulation/lagging does not help those living in older properties which do not have wall cavities;
- A group has been set up between the CRC, Defra and Age Concern to look into fuel poverty issues.

Discussion followed about the importance of linking energy production with communities – for example anaerobic, hydro, and wind production. Closer community links are likely to mean greater acceptance, and there is a need to be cleverer regarding incentives: communities with wind farms could receive free energy for their village halls.

Jonathan Shaw suggested inviting someone from BERR to the next meeting for a discussion of community renewable energy production and

	<p>ownership, financial instruments, and involving people.</p> <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chairs should continue to identify ideas for discussion at future RAF Chairs meetings. • Jonathan Shaw to write to the Chairs on the Energy Saving Programme and where to get help/advice. • Jonathan Shaw to write to the Chairs about Defra's work with DWP on targeting groups to increase take up of benefits. • Graham Garbutt to circulate information on fuel poverty statistics, and provide detail on the group which CRC has set up to look at fuel poverty issues. • Community renewable energy production to be on agenda for next meeting, and the Minister will invite a representative from BERR. • Defra to draw Chairs' attention to forthcoming consultation on renewable energy production.
<p>Rural Advocates Report</p> <p><i>Pam Smith, EMRAF</i></p>	<p>Pam Smith presented a paper on the recent Rural Advocate's Rural Economies Report. She welcomed the useful report, but highlighted concerns about the recommendations, and the extent to which these had been shared amongst stakeholders, in particular the private sector. Various general points were made:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to avoid creating new layers of bureaucracy; • Not CRC job to implement the recommendations of the report; • Some scepticism about the needs for rural champions; • Challenge for CRC to bring about effective rural mainstreaming amongst delivery organisations, including an improved understanding of rural policy. <p>Graham Garbutt thanked Pam for introducing the paper, and noted that some of her points were consistent with those received from others, including RDAs. He explained that there is a huge challenge to sustain a vibrant private sector outside of the south east, and that he felt that perhaps the city regions model has proved a distraction from effective rural delivery. Graham explained that the CRC is not looking to lead on recommendations but will be ensuring that they will be taken forwards. He offered to provide a written response to the RRAF paper. He also touched upon the need for any rural summit to be focused.</p> <p>Some discussion ensued, and the Chairs encouraged consideration of how to link implementation of the Rural Advocate's Rural Economies Report with implementation of recommendations in the Taylor Review. The point was also made that local authorities have a crucial role in implementation.</p> <p>Graham Garbutt highlighted the forthcoming OECD rural policy country study, which will add to our understanding about how best to fit interventions to rural delivery.</p>

	<p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graham Garbutt to write to RRAF Chairs with response to their paper on the Rural Advocate's Rural Economies Report. • Include Rural Advocate's Rural Economies Report on agenda for the next meeting.
<p>Regional experiences of LAAs</p> <p><i>Jonathan Shaw MP</i></p>	<p>The session provide a forum for discussion of regional experiences of the LAA process. The Chairs gave Jonathan Shaw their thoughts, and the following observations were made:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring adequate rural coverage in LAAs is often very difficult • In the South East, following the revamping of the RRAF, LSPs are now much more closely linked to the Forum, and this increases the engagement on rural issues; • The chosen 198 LAA indicators were not well rural-proofed in the first place, which meant that whatever indicators were chosen as part of the LAA process, their relevance to some rural needs has been limited; • Local Authorities are looking for interventions with biggest impacts, which often excludes rural activity; • Successful local rural delivery depends on having appropriate evidence to hand to highlight rural needs and to enable appropriate decision-making; • Experiences of rural consideration within largely urban districts is mixed – in some areas there has been a focus on urban deprivation, whilst in other largely urban areas much has been done on the rural front (Rotherham has focused on empowering Parish Councils, for example); • Experiences also reflect previous capacity building – Objective 1 and Leader programmes have built capacity in some areas, with consequent benefits in terms of engagement of rural stakeholders in LAA process; • There is a need to factor the Defra rural definition into LAA performance management; • Must now take lessons forward into the MAA process. <p>The CRC commented on their work with ACRE on learning events which will be building on LAA experiences. They are also working with Essex County Council on disaggregating LAA performance data, in order to find out more about what is being done at local levels. Crispin Moore offered to provide written briefing on this to the Chairs.</p> <p>Stan Collins provided an LGA perspective, commenting that this is clearly a new process, and that examples of good practice are needed . He also made the point that LAAs have done best where there is strong engagement with communities – and that LAAs must therefore work as a</p>

	<p>tool to empower stakeholders.</p> <p>The Government Office also gave their views on the process: citing the lack of rural content in the national guidance was an issue, and noting that it has proven difficult to ensure appropriate rural coverage in LAAs.</p> <p>Jonathan Shaw thanked the Chairs for their input, and summarised – stressing the importance of effective involvement of people in LAA and MAA processes in future.</p>
<p>Food security</p> <p><i>Jonathan Shaw MP</i></p>	<p>It was agreed that this agenda item would be dealt with by correspondence.</p>
	<p>Lunch</p>
<p>Strong Rural Communities Partnership Group</p>	<p>Ron Scrutton confirmed that the Partnership Group will not change the nature of the RAF Chairs meetings with the Minister. The Chairs will still have the morning session with the Minister, while the afternoon session will represent a more focused mechanism for stakeholder influence and engagement with the Departmental Strategic Objective.</p> <p>The Strong Rural Communities Partnership Group will comprise the chairs of the 8 Regional Rural Affairs Forums, and representatives of the RDAs, LGA, Government Offices and ACRE. It will provide advice to the Programme Board on the development and implementation of the Government's Strong Rural Communities programme - encompassing national, regional and local interests; and be an active partner in the development and implementation of the programme, both as individual member organisations and collectively.</p> <p>It will meet at least twice a year. Its meetings will be opportunities for the Government to present early thinking on rural policy issues for the Group's views (i.e. to act as a sounding board); Members to share their experience of the implementation of rural policies; and Members to share their thoughts on the communication of progress on delivering the DSO Programme.</p> <p>The meeting discussed whether members of the Partnership Group should also attend the meeting with the Minister. RRAF Chairs expressed a strong desire to maintain a quarterly meeting with the Minister which was their own, but acknowledged that the LGA was already invited regularly. No firm conclusions were reached, but it was broadly accepted that others might be invited when the agenda made sense for them to attend.</p>
<p>CRC – RRAF working arrangements</p>	<p>Finalising the working arrangements:</p>

	<p>The “Windermere Accord” which sets out proposed CRC-RRAF working arrangements was approved by all parties. Defra will ensure that the Minister is informed of this. Individual Forums will now ratify the agreement.</p> <p>Inclusion of ACRE in RRAF/CRC Agreement:</p> <p>A discussion took place on the input RRAFs want from ACRE, and possible future roles for RCCs in supporting and facilitating RAs in the regions.</p> <p>Tony Williamson noted that GO capacity to support RRAFs has been reduced, and that increasingly they are focused on providing strategic assistance, rather than secretariat support. He said that that RRAF secretariat support could, if it made sense and was acceptable to all parties, be delegated to RCC regional bodies. He stressed that this was a practical option to suit the needs of the regions who wished to pursue it and that Defra had no specific model in mind, and recognised that there were likely to be regional variations. He also confirmed that there is no intention to hand over power or control of the RRAFs to the RCCs, and their involvement would solely be about process support.</p>
<p>Rural proofing the DCLG consultation</p>	<p>Graham Ward agreed to work on a joint response to the post-SNR DCLG consultation, and will use his experiences from a professionally facilitated regional consultation workshop – working also with the EMRAF Coordinator.</p> <p>Graham Garbutt encouraged the Chairs to respond to this consultation, stressing its importance, and suggested that this might be an issue for discussion at the next meeting.</p>
<p>Homes and Communities Agency</p>	<p>Graham Garbutt drew the Chairs’ attention to the new Homes and Communities Agency. There was some discussion of the importance of ensuring that the work of the agency is effectively rural-proofed, and Graham Garbutt registered concerns about this, noting that it is difficult to get funding into rural. He also noted that the CRC is looking at how to shift planning practice to promote sustainable communities and looking to find a new consensus on what this might mean.</p> <p>David Stewart made a general point about RRAF effectiveness in responding to consultations – noting the importance of knowing the facts and improving national coordination, and that some further discussion could be undertaken on mechanisms to secure effective national coordination.</p> <p>Action points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crispin Moore to write to Chairs about the Homes and Communities Agency.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Defra to find out if CLG have asked the GOs to undertake sustainability appraisals.• Defra to communicate with RRAFs on progress on the Sub-National Review.
Induction of new chairs	It was agreed that CRC, Defra and existing Chairs would work together on induction of new RRAF Chairs.