

REGIONAL RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM CHAIRS' MEETING
THURSDAY 14 May 2009
ROOM 806 NOBEL HOUSE

Attendees:

Huw Irranca-Davies	Minister	Stuart Burgess	CRC
John Yates	EERAF	Crispin Moor	CRC
David Stewart	NERAF	Nicola Lloyd	CRC
Douglas Chalmers	NWRAF	Elaine Howard	GONW
David Rowlands	NWRAF	Tony Williamson	Defra
Geoff Stevens	EMRAF	Sarah Wardle	Defra
Bob Forster	WMRAF	Kathleen Kelliher	Defra
Stephen Parsons	SWRAF	Samreen Lodhi	Defra
Shelagh Marshall	Y&HRAF	Caron Britton	Defra
Andrew Bowles	SERAF	Tim Crosier	Cabinet Office
David Wood	Rural Action East		

Apologies:

Paul Bettison	LGA	Stephen Wright	SWAN
Graham Ward	YHRAF		

Introductions and Minister's Opening Remarks

1. Following introductions, the Minister opened discussion about Ministerial visits to the regions. The RRAF Chairs asked that they be invited to attend rural Ministerial visits as such meetings had gone ahead in the past without the relevant RRAF Chair being aware. The Minister agreed to remind those organising his visits of the need to involve RRAF Chairs as appropriate. The RRAF Chairs went on to commend the OECD review of rural policy – challenging questions were being considered.

2. There was some discussion around the Matthew Taylor report and the Minister highlighted Defra's work with CLG around the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) and Master Planning. It was agreed that in 6-9 months it would be useful to reflect on the work of the HCA.

ACTION: *To consider an agenda item on the work of the HCA at a future meeting – Rural Policy team.*

Round Table discussion of key Rural Issues, including State of the Rural Economy

3. The RRAF chairs reported that the experience of rural England in the current economic downturn is a mixed picture, with rural areas generally experiencing many of the same effects as urban areas, while also showing a good degree of resilience. However, they were clear that small businesses were finding it difficult to secure the bank loans and other credit they need in order to maintain cash flow. The RRAFs felt there was a need for greater support from the banks and a more reasonable attitude to repayment deadlines for struggling businesses.

4. Tourism in some regions was benefiting from the fair weather and an increase in domestic holiday making - it was noted that cheaper venues such as caravan parks were doing well. On the other hand, restaurants and hotels were reporting slow business. Unemployment was on the rise in rural areas and business confidence was weak – the support of the CAB and Business Links was, therefore, critical. The RRAF Chairs reinforced the point about the need to connect rural England to a good broadband infrastructure to support local enterprise and the job market.

5. They also reported that one casualty of the recession was the third sector which was receiving less funding, including a reduction in gift aid. It was noted that this was important as the third sector plays a crucial role in delivering services in the rural areas.

Rural Proofing – New CRC Toolkit - Crispin Moor

6. Crispin explained that Defra and CRC were committed to promoting rural mainstreaming and rural proofing at the national, regional and local levels. He outlined the structure and purpose of the new toolkit, and stressed that it needed to be applied at the initial stages of policy making in order to be really effective. The CRC and Defra were developing a joint engagement plan, and the next step was to build the capacity of central government departments and regional agencies to ensure that rural is embedded in mainstream decision making.

7. Defra said it would be helpful if the RRAF chairs could promote and monitor rural proofing in their regions wherever possible. The CRC stated that it would be happy to attend RRAF meetings to present an item on rural proofing if invited. Defra and CRC will keep the RRAF Chairs updated on progress with the overall project.

ACTION: CRC & Defra to update at future meetings.

Older People and Rural Exclusion - Tim Crosier, Social Exclusion Unit

8. Tim gave a PowerPoint presentation on the joint Cabinet Office and Defra project "Working together for older people in rural areas". The report was due to be published shortly (postscript: it was published in July and can be accessed at: http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/short_studies/working_together.aspx)

9. The aim of the project was to take stock of the evidence on the issues experienced by older people in rural areas; understand who among them is most at risk of experiencing exclusion; and identify innovation in public services to address that exclusion. The overall message was that the rural population is ageing faster and by 2029 those over the age of sixty are likely to have doubled in numbers. In discussion, it was noted that the significant connection between health and housing needs to be recognized.

Rural Access to Benefits (initial findings) - Stuart Burgess, CRC & Steve Parsons, SWRAF

10. The overall picture showed that there is a significant proportion of rural residents who are either not aware of their entitlement to benefits or choose to not draw benefits. There are also those who find it difficult to access benefits (complicated forms etc). DWP has made a concerted effort to ensure that older people receive their entitlements.

11. There is evidence to show that generally people are missing out on the essentials in life as a result. Stephen Wright was writing a paper on rural access to benefits but could not be present at the meeting. The group invited a more detailed discussion on this at the next meeting on 24 September.

ACTION: Follow up with Stephen Wright and consider this as an item for 24 September meeting.

Meeting Close/AOB/Issues for Next Meeting

2009 meeting dates:

Thursday 24 September 2009

Thursday 3 December 2009