

**East of England Rural Forum Secretariat
c/o GO-East Rural Team
Eastbrook
Shaftesbury Road
Cambridge CB2 2DF**



Telephone: 01223 372775
Fax: 01223 372864
E-mail: RuralForum@goeast.gsi.gov.uk

East of England Rural Forum

www.eerf.org.uk

Jonathan Shaw
Defra
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London
SW1P 3JR

Our ref: 0808LegisFram
Date: 6 August 2008

Dear Jonathan

I am responding to your request to comment upon the Government's Draft Legislative Programme for 2008/09. In doing so the rural perspective has been applied only where issues have been identified as being pertinent following consultation across the East of England Region.

Economic Stability

Lack of affordable housing has been identified as having a significant impact on the economy of rural communities. Both the recent Taylor Review and the Annual Report of the Rural Advocate provide confirmation in some depth on the issues. Any measures to assist in a time of economic downturn are, therefore, welcomed in particular the Special Liquidity Scheme and the proposal to purchase unsold homes for social rent or shared ownership.

The issue is whether these measures are sufficient or appropriate to rural communities? The Liquidity Scheme should benefit all communities but it will be important to ensure that rural areas receive an equal share. The ratio of earnings to house prices is approximately 5.8% in rural communities and therefore the investment would need to be proportionately higher. Also, many available homes in rural and coastal areas are used as second homes or as holiday lets. This market may not be responsive to the social market unless some form of incentive is put in place. Likewise the amount set aside is insufficient in relation to the size of the problem.

As the downward trend of loss of services in rural areas continues (shops, pubs, post offices etc.) the impact of the business rates supplement could have a further devastating effect. We urge that special dispensation should be given to small businesses and that a sliding scale should be introduced as opposed to a blanket imposition.

Education and Skills

We have previously submitted to you a paper on Learning and Skills and are pleased to note that the proposals raised have been incorporated.

Environment

The overall approach to climate change is supported and rural areas have a significant role to play.

Renewable energy sources are at the forefront of EU targets. There is a need to consider the use of land in this country in respect of housing, food and renewable energy. There will be continuing debate on these priorities across the East of England in the autumn and I hope we will be able to add to the public consultation now underway.

Water conservation is essential in this region as the majority of available resource is from other areas. Our paper previously forwarded to you outlines the problems and suggested proposals. We, therefore, welcome the opportunity to contribute to the draft Floods and Water Bill. Likewise we welcome the Marine and Coastal Access Bill and the proposed Heritage Protection Bill on which we will comment under separate cover.

A Fairer Nation

This programme applies equally to both urban and rural areas

Personalisation and Improvement of Public Services

Under Safety and Security the proposals to localise policing priorities is welcomed. In parts of this region considerable steps have already taken place in this direction, with considerable benefits. In the past rural areas with sparse populations have suffered from lack of presence and response, but the coming together of neighbouring parishes to determine priorities has helped. It has also brought communities together. Further moves in this direction along with stronger local decision making through directly elected representatives is welcomed.

Binge and underage drinking are particular issues in market towns in this region and the proposals to address this are welcomed.

The dependence of rural business on migrant labour is well documented and the proposed overhaul of the legal framework should assist.

Health

This region has contributed significantly to the CRC response to the Darzi Review. I will not therefore make additional comment other than to support the need for the proposed consultation on care and support services. The migration to rural areas for retirement purposes is an increasing trend and the need to improve services is therefore essential.

Housing

Considerable housing growth has been designated in this Region through the published RSS. This was discussed in depth at the last EERF Forum Meeting and a position paper is being produced. The overall outcome was a need for appropriate sustainable growth combining housing, jobs and recreational and cultural activity. Recent new towns have significantly failed in this regard.

Handing Power Back to the People

In rural areas the importance of Parish Councils is paramount, however there is a need to strengthen their role with effective status, good parish planning and roles and responsibilities. The general public are often confused regarding which tier is responsible for what and there is also a propensity for tiers of Local Government to blame one another for lack of delivery. This needs radical change. Support to volunteers in community services is also needed. It is hoped that the new bill will address these points.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Yates', written in a cursive style.

John Yates
Chair, East of England Rural Forum