

NOTES OF THE TWENTY FIRST MEETING OF THE WEST MIDLANDS RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM

**on Thursday 7th March 2007 at 10:30
at Fulford Village Hall, Fulford Road,
Fulford, Staffordshire WS11 9QT**

These minutes can be read in Word format [here](#)

For membership list click [here](#)

Papers associated with this meeting, and linked to on this page, are available in Word format, unless otherwise stated.

Chair: Rev'd Nick Read	Secretary: Carol Johnson
<i>Countryside, Environment and Recreation</i>	
1. Environment Agency	Barbara Yates - Apologies received
2. West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership	Steve Holliday - Apologies received
3. English Heritage	Tim Johnston
4. Visit Heart of England	Nigel Russell - Apologies received – Jo Jury attending
5. National Trust	Hugh Devlin - Apologies received
<i>Rural Economy and Employment</i>	
6. National Farmers Union	David Collier
7. Country Land and Business Association	Frances Beatty - Apologies received
8. Learning and Skills Councils	Sharon Gray - Apologies received
9. Confed. WM Chambers of Commerce	Christopher Harvey - Apologies received
10. Business Links	Mark Davies
11. Transport and General Workers Union	Sean Glennon - Apologies received
12. Network of Rural Hubs	Henry Lucas
<i>Rural Communities and Services including the Voluntary Sector</i>	
13. Chaplaincy for Agricultural and Rural Life	Rev Peter Dakin
14. WM Network of Rural Community Councils	Malcolm Kimber
15. DoH WM Public Health Group	Rowena Clayton - Apologies received
16. Young Farmers Clubs and Rural Youth	Lionel Hill - Apologies received - Michelle Harrison attending
17. Association of Colleges	Heather Barrett-Mold
18. Higher Education	Brian Revell - Apologies received
19. Regional Action West Midlands	Sharon Palmer - Apologies received
20. Regional Transport Strategy Forum	Bruce Undy
21. Commission for Rural Communities	Alison McLean (Vice Chair)

Central Government Bodies	
22. GOWM	Steve Kennett - Apologies Received - David Howatson attending
23. Natural England	Mike Grace
26. Forestry Commission	Bill Heslegrave
Local Government	
27. WM Association of Parish and Town Councils	Roger Evans – Apologies Received
28. WM Local Government Association	Claude Bodenham
29. West Mercia, Warks & Staffs Police Authorities	Richard Hobbs – Apologies Received
Regional Forums	
30. Regional Housing Partnership	Richard Gabb
31. AWM	Mark Pearce
32. AWM Board	Michael Oakes – Apologies Received
33 Culture West Midlands	Laura Venn / Gavin Willetts – Apologies Received
34. Regional Assembly	To be advised
35. Regional Assembly Secretariat	Rose Poulter - Apologies Received - Kate Docherty Attending
Sub Regional Forums	
36. Herefordshire Partnership	Jennifer Watkins
37. Shropshire Partnership	Paul Shevlin
38. Stoke & Staffs Strategic Partnership	Steve Burrows – Apologies Received
39. Worcestershire Partnership	Peter Smith
40. Coventry , Solihull and Warwickshire Rural Forum	Mandy Walker – Apologies Received
Speakers	
Clare Greener - Shropshire County Council	Ian Baker - Advantage West Midlands
Observers	
Sara Roberts - Regional Assembly/GOWM	Polly Woolley - Ruralnetuk
Rebecca Frost - CRC	Chris Welch - Community Council of Staffordshire
Viv O'Connor - Shropshire Access Partnership	Peter Davenport - West Midlands Regional Assembly
Rebecca Owen – GOWM	Nigel Daw - GOWM

Members are encouraged to cascade Minutes and associated Rural Sound Bites to their Networks

1. Welcome

The Chairman opened the Meeting and welcomed everyone to Fulford Village Hall in Staffordshire for the 21st Meeting of the Forum. The meeting would be discussing the strategic aims for the Forum, exploring the key messages from the Rural Pathfinder and developing an understanding of Rural Hubs.

(Members were reminded to complete the Carbon Neutral Proforma and to note the calculation results from the previous Forum recently circulated).

2. Apologies

These were noted; please see Membership List above .

DECISIONS

3. Progress against Actions **WMF21/3**

Members noted the document, but expressed some disquiet regarding Item 6:

New Business Support Services beginning on 1 April 07 and reassurances that the level of rural expertise would be retained in the new Business Support Services. However, it was reported that Gill Hamer would be drawing contractors together to identify existing expertise and it was Defra's expectation that farm-based, urban, and rural business advice would be undertaken in a single region-wide business support service. Gill would also provide a six month progress report at the September 07 Forum.

i. Report from the Management Committee **WMF21/3i**

Members noted the document.

4. Matters Arising

i. Rural Proofing

Alison McLean reported that a Rural Commentary had been produced regarding the West Midlands Economic Strategy Review Consultation on Policy Choices, bringing together the evidence base and the work from the Rural Workshop held on 1st February 2007. This formed part of the 'rural proofing' process for one stage of the strategy and this would be an iterative process. The Rural Commentary has been posted on the Advantage West Midlands website and the Forum website for information.

ii. The Rural Workshop looked at both the West Midlands Economic Strategy (WMES) and the West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy (WMRSS)

Sara Roberts drew together separate Forum responses to each strategy from comments made during the workshops and from wider Forum members and these have now been submitted. The responses have also been captured in **Information Paper No.29 WMES** and **No. 30 WMRSS** and circulated to members. The response to the WMES will inform the development of the first draft of the strategy to be issued in May 07 for its statutory 12 week consultation and publication in September 2007. The Chairman extended his thanks to Alison McLean, Sara Roberts and to everyone for the contributions made.

iii. Rural Development Programme for England - Regional Implementation Plan (RIP)

Ian Baker updated members on the RIP following the previous Forum's decision that further collaboration was required before its submission to Defra. Ian explained that the issues raised by members had been considered and whilst it was recognised that there were some unresolved issues, it had been agreed by all parties that the revised document prepared by the European Rural Group (ERG) drafting group be forwarded to Defra to meet the timeframe outlined. Ian Baker thanked the ERG and the Forum for their responses and stated that the **latest draft of the RIP** had been posted on the Forum website together with the original Annexes as part of the operational guidelines.

iv. Cross Border Event on 5th March 2007

The Cross-Border Event took place at Ludlow Race Course and was attended by 80 regional partners, who witnessed the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Mid-Wales

and the West Midlands region. The Event included workshops to discuss thematic issues and a Report was being produced that would include Actions that would be monitored by the Steering Group. Members agreed that this was an important development and looked forward to receiving the report and seeing the implementation of the ideas outlined within it.

ACTION: Chairman to forward the Report from the event for members' attention. Secretariat to arrange for the agreed Memorandum of Understanding to be posted on the Forum website.

v. Annual Conference Report

The Report has been forwarded to delegates, Forum members and **has been posted on the website** (in pdf format) for information.

vi. Draft Regional Health & Wellbeing Strategy

The draft Strategy would be forwarded to members in early March 07 as part of Public Consultation being undertaken until mid-June 2007. A key group of members would be asked to draw a Forum response together. The strategy has undergone some initial 'rural proofing'. A Rural Commentary was being prepared to inform the authors, the Forum key group to assist the Forum response and for the attention of the Management Committee.

ACTION:

- 1. Rowena Clayton to forward the Draft Health & Wellbeing Strategy to the Forum in March 07.**
- 2. Health & Wellbeing Strategy Rural Proofing Workshop on 29th March 07 to draw up a Rural Commentary for Authors, Key Group and Management Committee.**
- 3. Key Group – Secretariat to contact key members and agree how a response would be drawn together on behalf of the Forum.**

vii. Rural Mental Health

Rowena Clayton provided a written update to members following last year's workshop. A project is currently under development (DHWM and the Care Services Improvement Partnership WM) to look at the capacity and capability of rural mental health projects in the voluntary sector, in particular to help them look at the PCT commissioning route as a future source of funds.

DISCUSSIONS

5. Strategic Aims for the Forum 2007-2008 WMF21/5

The Chairman presented a Draft Work Programme to members, explaining that it represented the Forum's aspirations and was a reflection of what the Forum were doing including identified thematic areas and associated actions, and he asked members for their views.

Partnership Working

The RAF Chairs group were trying to break out of the Defra mould to work with other government departments, and this was particularly important in light of Defra's intention to mainstream 'rural' within the remit of other departments who have not previously had a rural brief. The Forum were taking a similar approach and the Chairman indicated that the first four way meeting of regional partners had taken place on 22nd February 2007 with Advantage West Midlands, Regional Assembly and Government Office for the West Midlands, with the intention to include Natural England in the future.

Issues of Regional Significance

The Forum has put aside a small amount of funding to focus on local issues of regional concern and significance to offer the Forum an opportunity to engage by way of facilitating a meeting to draw together interested partners and agencies to discuss and formulate potential solutions. The Chairman cited the Clun Valley in Shropshire as an example where there were

environmental, social and economic issues of concern. Members agreed and were asked to make a case to the Management Committee as issues were identified, but it was emphasised that the Forum would not however fund any projects directly.

Specialist Seminars

Seminars have been planned to take place after the Forum meetings until the end of the year and members were asked for ideas for Specialist Seminars in 2008.

Annual Conference 2007

It is proposed that Sustainable Rural Communities be the subject of this year's Annual Conference to explore what 'sustainability' really means in rural communities, using a partnership approach with other agencies. Members agreed to this idea and the Chairman asked for volunteers to form a Scoping Group of interested people to participate in initial thinking and ideas for speakers.

Rebecca Frost clarified that the Commission for Rural Communities would continue to support the Forum and its specialist seminars and annual conference, via themed Implementation Managers inputting per subject area.

ACTION:

- 1. Members agreed that a budget be earmarked to address issues of regional significance.**
- 2. Members to contact the secretariat with proposals for specialist seminars for 2008 by 3rd April 07.**
- 3. Members to contact Secretariat to be involved in a Scoping Group to develop ideas for the Annual Conference concerning Sustainable Rural Communities by 30th April 07.**
- 4. Secretariat to revise the Draft Work Programme.**

Annual Report

The Chairman explained that the West Midlands and East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum were the only two regional Forums who produced an Annual Report. The West Midlands Annual Report was currently being prepared setting out the role of the Forum and its priorities for the coming year. Members were asked to suggest other opportunities the Forum could adopt to influence at a regional and national level in its role to collectively represent rural interests as a rural stakeholder group and to identify the most appropriate people to target to take this forward, ie a briefing for ministers.

Discussion

Members made the following suggestions:

Ideas for mainstreaming 'rural issues'

- Review priorities across Whitehall departments to identify who and where the Forum may influence and use the information when members attend meetings as appropriate.
- The Forums should put forward a mechanism to help Defra mainstream 'rural' using concrete examples of how to rural proof (what works and what doesn't).
- Ensure that local authorities and local strategic partnerships recognise the importance of rural in their responsibilities.

Influencing Tools

- The Annual Report would become more important as a tool to influence partners for the future.

ACTION: Members to forward further ideas to Secretariat by 16th April 2007.

Clare Greener presented the key messages and recommendations emerging from the Shropshire Rural Pathfinder that began two years ago. It was agreed from the beginning that it was impossible to do such innovative work on a short timescale, however, additional funding had become available to enable the pilots undertaken to be evaluated.

Six key messages have emerged that require further shaping and refining. Clare gave a summary of the achievements of the Shropshire Pathfinder and explained that some regions had done more than others and noted that some were very academic. Shropshire had taken a practical approach, using in-house research and practical demonstrations that highlighted lots of ways locally and regionally to create strong and prosperous communities who have a bigger say in the services they received, in shaping the places where they lived, and of enabling service providers to respond more flexibly to local needs.

Key messages

- A need to empower communities and their services to deliver better services, increase take-up engaging the community in delivery and improve personal public customer services.
- No one should be disadvantaged where they live.
- A need to join up delivery with an emphasis on Shropshire Access Partnership making decisions that went beyond market towns to where there was more disadvantage.
- A need to pilot different ways of delivering services in village halls, and looking at transactional ways of delivery.
- A need to consider how rural communities can preserve their local shop and garage.
- Encourage local authorities to work across geographic boundaries especially on economic and environmental sustainability with other counties of England and Wales.

Members were asked to give their views regarding the contents of the Draft Table where national messages were being shaped to form the national messages to government. Clare agreed to use the comments to inform the contents of the final document that would be agreed at a Pathfinder event on 21st June 2007.

Discussion

Members gave views on the Key Messages and the Draft Table of National Messages (Appendix One)

Key Messages:

Key Message 5 referred to 'local services'- members queried if local authorities could be encouraged to work with central government to develop weighted concessions to support the concept of a single shop in a village being a 'general store' offering local services?

Members agreed that this work was timely as there was other work being undertaken, ie a study on Access to Rural Services by Advantage West Midlands, but it would be necessary to ensure the messages were conveyed in the right context and at a local level to ensure a joined approach is adopted to improve services to suit residents. Clare agreed and said that there was a huge amount of evidence that could be utilised by the region.

Although the issues had been around a long time the Pathfinder demonstrates that using a different approach had worked, ie providing Citizens Advice Bureau services in village halls etc and these ideas could be developed for the future.

Draft Table of National Messages (Appendix one)

Members were cautious regarding the terminology used and felt that the language and layout were unhelpful. Members recognised that the table was wider than Access to Services in that it reflected all eight regional pathfinders and felt that it might not work as a national document.

The Table would be strengthened if some of the key messages/challenges ran alongside it.

There was surprise that a regional level was not included in the Table and suggested this be rectified, and it was also suggested that Rural Access to Services Partnerships in each county

across the region be included.

Members queried what was meant by a 'sustainable community', how we would want to develop a sustainable community and what services would we want. In addition, how would this be disaggregated down to a local level, otherwise it would be impossible to rural proof in small geographical areas in rural communities.

The importance of community capacity was raised but this didn't really come through. Members would like to see funding offered to rural areas in the Rural Regeneration Zone rolled out to include all rural areas.

Kate Docherty confirmed that the Regional Assembly would incorporate the evidence provided from both the Pathfinder and Advantage West Midlands Access to Services Study into Phase III of the WMRSS later in the year.

**ACTION: Clare Greener to use comments offered to rewrite table.
Members also suggested that Ministers of Parliament be invited to Specialist Seminar on Access to Services on 7th June 07.**

7. Rural Hubs WMF21/6

Henry Lucas explained the history of the West Midlands Rural Hub Network and how it has developed due to the fast changing nature of farming and to some extent rural businesses post foot and mouth. Each of the five hubs were independent and had developed in a slightly different way across the region, using a bottom up 'people' focused approach. They were a growing resource tailoring their programmes to meet their member's needs and joining together with other organisations to make them more effective to deliver programmes of events and activities appropriate to farming in their area, as a meeting place where rural businesses come together and discuss project ideas, collaborate and develop opportunities. They also acted as a mechanism for targeting business support.

They were looking at how they can move forward with new partners to work in new ways and develop in order to be able to respond to the new emerging role within the new Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) Regional Implementation Plan (RIP). An evaluation is currently being conducted by the Plunket Foundation to identify how to take the Rural Hubs forward.

Members were asked to offer advice regarding the development of the hubs, their new role in supporting the new RDPE delivery, and recommendations regarding how the hubs should be funded over the long-term, ie all private, all public or a mixture of both offering a mechanism that would work to offer long-term rural business gain.

Discussion

Members discussed how the Hubs would influence the RDPE RIP and requested clarification regarding the timetable for the evaluation and, requested that the results from the evaluation outlining their future role and clarification regarding longer term funding options should be provided to the Forum?

Ian Baker, from Advantage West Midlands responded that the evaluation would identify where the rural hubs needed to be to deliver RDPE and this would be included in the final drafting phase of the RIP and would be provided to the Forum with the agreement of the Government Office and the Hub Chairs. David Howatson reiterated that the Rural Hubs were independent and the work concerning the Rural Hub developments involved wider issues including the hubs role as the regional champions for Regional Strategy for Farming and Food.

Ian went on to confirm that there had been a delay in agreeing funding for the hubs, however this did allow time to consider how the hubs could be developed for the future. Advantage West Midlands had provided £100k funding each year for the last 3 years with expectation that the hubs build their sustainability and this was still under discussion. He quoted one

example where Warwickshire Hub had organised an exemplar event attracting growers and they could now consider how to take this forward to build a sustainable network across the region.

Members asked for practical examples of the work undertaken by the rural hubs and the following success stories were given:

Success Stories

Warwickshire Hub:

Currently developing a 'Resource Efficiency Club' to put projects together to look at solutions to waste recycling with the advice from Envirowise.

A recent survey of its membership showed 95% rated the reliability and usefulness of the hub as high or very high, whilst 76% said involvement with the hub had been valuable or very valuable in helping them make business decisions. A larger percentage stated that they had changed their business practices due to involvement with the hub.

The Green Grocer Project 'Fresher by Miles' delivering and marketing local food to local people, business and schools within a 30 mile radius.

'Hearty Breakfasts' encouraging rural B&Bs to supply locally supplied foods with links to Ryton Organic Gardens.

Shropshire Hub

The 'Made in Shropshire' Craft Group holds regular markets in Shrewsbury and also works with schools on local food procurement.

Worcester Hub

Acorn project a small funding stream for young people to access capital items for new businesses.

Hereford Hub

Green Futures' a regional series of events helping farmers understand the regulation and to assist them to complete necessary forms.

Staffordshire Hub

has developed work with Farmer's Markets.

ACTION:

- 1. Ian Baker to clarify when the results of the Evaluation outlining the Rural Hubs future role would be available to the Forum.**
- 2. Ian Baker to give a written response to the Forum regarding the future funding of the Rural Hubs.**

8. Any Other Business

a) City-Regions and Rural Parts of the Region

Ian Baker provided an update regarding a piece of work that started a year ago regarding the interaction between the City- Region and the rural parts of the region. It has been agreed to update the 2003 Ecotec report on urban/rural interdependencies with a focussed brief to explore what would be appropriate actions to develop to improve the linkages between the city-region and rural areas. It was agreed that information about this would be posted on the Forum website. It was not clear currently what direction the government would take regarding city-regions. Members expressed the wish to see something practical from this work.

Alison McLean raised the EU Structural Funds Regional Competitiveness and Employment Programme 2007-13 Consultation currently underway. The five Shire Counties were submitting their response and the Forum may also wish to do so by 12th March 2007.

ACTION:

Ian Baker to forward information on the work being undertaken to develop and improve the linkages between the city-regions and the rural areas to Secretariat when available for posting on website.

The Forum to provide a formal response by 12th March 2007 (The five Shire Counties were asked to forward a copy of their responses to the Secretariat for the Chairman's attention).

b) Access Task Group

The Chairman explained that Malcolm Kimber would be retiring from the Forum following today's meeting and he would be discussing the future of the Forum's Access Task Group with Malcolm. The Chairman thanked Malcolm for the work undertaken on the Forum's behalf.

c) Heritage White Paper

Tim Johnson updated members that the white Paper created major changes for designation of world heritage sites and was likely to become a Bill in 2008-09.

d) Forum on 13th September at Ludlow Football Club

Claude agreed to organise a tour of Ludlow Football Club following the meeting for members.

e) The Chairman formally thanked Malcolm Kimber and Frances Beatty who were retiring from the Forum for the work they had undertaken.

ACTION: The chairman to discuss the future the of Access Task Group with Malcolm Kimber on 23rd February 2007 and provide recommendations to the Management Committee on 2nd May 2007.

9. Dates of Future Meetings & Specialist Seminars in 2007 and 2008

● 7th June 2007: Worcestershire - Elmley Castle Village Hall, Pershore (Confirmed)

Specialist Seminar: Access to Services - Clare Greener

● 13th September 2007: Shropshire - Ludlow Football Club (Confirmed)

Specialist Seminar: Business Support - Paul Shevlin, Christopher Harvey, Lorraine Holmes?

● 6th December 2007: Birmingham - To be arranged

Specialist Seminar: Tourism - Nigel Russell

● 6th March 2008: Staffordshire - Balaston Village Hall (Confirmed)

The Catering for the Forum at Fulford Village Hall was undertaken by Felicity's Finest using regionally sourced food (Contact Felicity Tel: 01889 505238).

PLEASE NOTE:

ALL FORUM PAPERS, DOCUMENTS/CONSULTATIONS PRESENTED TO THE FORUM ARE AVAILABLE ON THE WEST MIDLANDS RURALNETWORK WEBSITE:

www.ruralnetworkwm.org.uk

Carol Johnson
Rural Affairs Forum Secretariat
carol.johnson@gowm.gsi.gov.uk
0121 352 5371
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