

Thursday 4 November 2010

British Racing School, Newmarket CB8 7NU

East of England Rural Forum

“Big Society and Localism – Opportunities for Rural Communities”

Minutes

Attendees

Frances Bedding	Richard Bindless	John Buchanan
Mick Carr	Rachel Carrington	Martin Collison
Rosemary Farmer	Marie Francis	Jim Gledhill
John Goodwin	Anne Marie Hamilton	Suzanne Harris
Brian Hayes	Philip Hayes	Teresa Heritage
Jeremy Hill	Louise Hobbs	Pat Holtom
Edwin Jones	Jasmine Joolia	Mags Lambert
Adam Lavis	Greg Luton	Corinne Meakins
Mick Page	Kate Sayer	John Simmons
Neil Stott	Hazel Williams	Philip Wilson
David Wood	Richard Woolley	

Apologies

Lesley Anderson	John Atherton	Martin Aust
John Barker	Laura Beardsell-Moore	Kate Belinis
Kirsten Bennett	Phil Bennett-Lloyd	Nicola Currie
Ed Gregory	Terry Harding	Edward Iveagh
Nicola Lloyd	Abi Patience	Nick Philips
Anil Soni	Cindy Winn	

Speakers

Adam Lavis, Senior Policy Adviser, Commission for Rural Communities
Neil Stott, Chief Executive, Keystone Development Trust

1. Welcome – Pat Holtom

Pat welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. News & Updates

Chair of Chairs Meeting

Pat gave an update on the RRAF Chairs' meeting with Richard Benyon, Defra Minister for Rural Affairs, the Natural Environment and Fisheries. Mr Benyon had highlighted four priority areas to be discussed which were transport, housing, broadband and community engagement. The Forums had paired up and presented papers on each of these subjects and identified ways in which government could assist with them. EERF worked with NW Forum on topic of affordable rural housing.

Regarding the future, Pat was hopeful that the value and broad membership of the RAFs would demonstrate that they were a good vehicle for government use and information. The Chairs would keep the pressure on to ensure the RAFs' future.

Adam Lavis added that Stuart Burgess of CRC was also meeting with Richard Benyon in the near future to discuss rural issues.

Rural White Paper

David Wood explained to the attendees that the Rural White Paper could not be issued in the way the Forum had planned because of cutbacks in the publicity/printing budgets. Instead copies had been sent electronically to all Forum Members, public sector officers, East of England MPs, Defra Ministers and other interested parties and uploaded onto EERF, RAE and CRC websites. Richard Benyon had sent a supportive response to Pat on receiving the paper. Drafting the associated Action Plan for the Rural White Paper was further delayed due to government changes and the number of regional organisations that were ceasing to exist. Next spring when things have settled down and there is more knowledge about what organisations are in place, an Action Plan will be drawn up and issued to members.

Richard Bindless hoped that the minister actually did support the paper and was not just saying what we want to hear.

Learning and Skills Sub-group

Martin Collison gave the Forum an update on Learning and Skills Sub-group work. Funding for training was again an issue due to the uncertainty / expected budget reductions but a constructive response was required, with private sector support if possible. The farming sector was currently doing very well and had created 8,000 new jobs. Both the food processing sector had seen a 4% rise and tourism in the area was also increasing and these were rises that we should be promoting more widely. Marie Francis explained that a vacuum existed in training for the farming sector and EERF needed to be proactive and influence the government before funds are allocated. There was scope for ideas that should be capitalised upon. Edwin Jones said he had recently attended a Farmers Club event and the definite message from the government was that it was our responsibility not theirs to progress. Teresa Heritage suggested that direct contact should be made with ministers and not the civil servants and we should use any local MP connections.

Housing Sub-group

As Martin Aust was not present, Pat gave a quick update on the Housing Sub-group. The Sub-group's view was that local exception sites should be supported by allowing developers to sell houses to support affordable housing developments. Also the right to build by local housing trusts and Home on Farms are also welcome initiatives. Feedback from Martin Collison was that the new housing uptake is not going to continue. Richard Bindless commented that major sources of funding not available and government ministers are sweeping away policies and threatening housing sustainability by giving local villages ability to make their own decisions. Jasmine Joolia told the Forum that she had attended a Homes and Community Agency meeting and asked if anyone had any suggestions for Rural Housing Enablers to please pass them to the Secretariat and she would forward them as appropriate.

3. Big Society and Localism Presentation

Adam Lavis of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) gave a presentation to the Forum on the Big Society; what it is, its principles, what the government's views are and what the primary focus of it should be. The Big Society is based upon freedom, fairness and responsibility and the principles involved are those of social action, community empowerment and public service reform. (See www.eerf.org.uk for copy of presentation.)

Jeremy Hill commented that the LEPs' and government's role were very non-descriptive. Adam said there was a need to promote economic growth in communities. Some roles of the RDAs

would be taken on by the LEPs and those who are disorganised and not marketing to the LEPs now will miss out.

Jim Gledhill stated that three regional organisations were involved in his area and they needed to be highly organised and discuss in detail how things are going to work in order to get maximum benefit in the future.

Kate Sayer asked how to protect small villages who didn't want housing, etc, as boroughs and town councils are urban focussed and it is not known how rural would fit in. Adam said that the government stressed that it could create more opportunities for communities but reduced budgets means that Town Councils will need to make difficult decisions in the future.

Richard Bindless pointed out that influencing was important as there will be many more people involved in LEPs to deal with and at different levels (European funding for example) and it will be difficult to influence all of them.

Rosemary Farmer pointed out that it would be beneficial if local people could have a say in local affairs.

Anne Marie Hamilton asked Adam what sanctions can be imposed on councils who don't toe the line. Adam stated that the ultimate sanction was the ballot box. National Indicators, the Audit Commission and other bodies are disappearing and Local Authorities will have the responsibility.

Hazel Williams stated that we should not forget the bad decisions that councils have been responsible for in the past.

4. Big Society in Practice Locally

Neil Stott, Chief Executive of Keystone Development Trust gave a talk on this topic. He pointed out that the Big Society appealed to Third Sector organisations that see this as an opportunity to own and manage local assets and deliver services which are responsive to local needs and desires. Some would argue that we are already doing Big Society.

The advantages of Big Society are the shift in the relationship between the state, local places and the citizen; there is an opportunity for asset transfers and social enterprise, allowing us to make a real difference and will make people stand up and be counted rather than lose services.

The negatives to Big Society are that it will involve a lot of change (possibly regular changes); will face a lot of resistance from institutions and those who do not wish to hand over power; working with communities can be challenging, risky and fraught with trust issues. Politics tend to mean short horizons and politicians like "new" initiatives. Conversely, communities have very long memories.

There are various coping mechanisms that can be put in place by all communities but the poor are always the worst hit even if there is a just a small economic shift as it hurts them the most. There are again trust issues within these communities as they see endless consultation and no action and if they shout they are deemed to be "difficult". A longer term outlook is required and for best results a mix of private, public and third sectors are required.

To avoid reinventing the wheel, time, resources and effort must be invested to build a community infrastructure that combines people, places and property but more importantly, we must be able to listen to communities. The book 'Big Society Challenge' will be launched in London early next year.

Martin Collison raised the issue of jobs as being as important as housing. Neil agreed that it was indeed an important subject to make the Big Society work you need all three legs – public, private and third sectors. If you take one of the legs away, the others struggle to survive.

Richard Woolley pointed out that there are so many barriers to overcome and you set yourself up to fail if you don't engage now as a group.

Francis Bedding asked Neil about Community Bonds. Neil described an organisation that had developed social bonds. Every £4 invested led to the charity getting an additional £1 which could be used for housing etc and the investor got their money back plus a return but many refused to take more than their investment back and therefore the charity profited again.

5. Table Discussions

The Forum members split into groups to discuss the implications of the Big Society and what we want to feedback to government. Each table was asked to consider the following questions:

1. What do you understand by 'Big Society'?
(Please give examples below)
2. Will you need to change the way you work to achieve the community engagement intrinsic to 'Big Society'?
(If yes, how will you achieve this? If no, how will you succeed?)
3. How do you think your organisation could work with other service delivery organisations to satisfy the needs of rural communities?'
(Please give examples)
4. In summary, do you believe that 'Big Society' will help to fulfil the needs for rural communities?

The views expressed in the discussions covered a wide range from the sceptical, through rural has been doing it for years, to the positive it will help by increasing recognition of work by rural communities. This was captured in the answers to question 4, "YES, if ..." or "NO, unless ...". The main two caveats being 'will public sector bodies truly realise control and devolve power to communities (and local TC/PCs)' and 'will support (and time) be given to communities to take advantage of their empowerment?'

A summary of the discussions is given in the Annex.

Pat thanked all the speakers for their interesting and thought provoking presentations and the members for their input to the discussions which had made for a very stimulating event.

The next meeting will be on the topic of Demographic Change which was one of the three priorities identified in the Forum's Rural White Paper. It will be held on **9 March 2010 at NFU offices, Newmarket.**

Close of Meeting

ANNEX

Summary of Table Discussions by EERF members on the Big Society

Table 1 – Facilitator: Jasmine Joolia

Q1. What do you understand by “Big Society”?

- Empowerment of communities, all the grand image; often engaged groups say they are doing it but is this what government want from them?
- Older people are working longer, they are often the volunteers and often move so in rural
- About local support within community not from a service hub.
- Big Society is devolution of power (this is the expectation from national government)
- There is a great need for individuals to take responsibility and then bring this to community responsibility.
- The Harpenden Trust has been in place since the war and is what is meant by Big Society as it gives a focus for communities to work effectively (in a deprived area set up a community action group)
- The change in focus is a starting point and now we need to find the leaders to carry this through.
- Part of localism and going down to grass roots.

Q2. Will you need to change the way you work to achieve the community engagement intrinsic to “Big Society”?

- Councillors already act as mediators so they have a role with community engagement. They are very passionate as they represent their communities.
- Engagement needs to include all members especially those on margins or in minorities
- Harpenden Trust looking to gather all third sector organisations and complete gap analysis to target those areas. They also want to engage and pull in all service providers and businesses.
- Part of community engagement is managing community expectation. Also important where action to follow through and deliver.
- Engagement needs to be appropriate to the community.
- Give the people a say, give them something to do, show the outcomes.
- Town and parish councils are the way to the local level
- Also an acceptance and ambition to engage with your people to embed the Big Society culture to continue.
- All organisations and Local Authorities need to make it easier to engage and employ flexibility to enable engagement.
- Age UK – support older peoples’ forums and that empowers them to influence at a local level.

Q3. How do you think your organisation could work with other service delivery organisations to satisfy the needs of rural communities?

- Harpenden Trust looking to gather all third sector organisations and complete gap analysis to target those areas. They also want to engage and pull in all service providers and businesses.
- Within Suffolk they are looking at a holistic view of one town, assessing the funding in, delivery and trying to use that money more effectively.
- Age UK provides a lot of services but low level preventable services to ensure and enable elderly to stay in homes.
- Cumulative benefit is important as Age UK is being asked to show benefit after a year.
- Hertfordshire have sharing of services for example early intervention working with communities. Herts model from Head of Social Services supporting shared services.

- Needs a change of view about “Public Service” – this is no longer seen as a valued method of delivery, not a good place to work etc.
- Important to note the work involved in attracting, training, assessing and co-ordinating volunteers. Volunteering is NOT free!

Q4. *In summary, do you believe that “Big Society” will help to fulfil the needs for rural communities?*

Yes, but

Table 2 – Facilitator: Pat Holtom

Q1. *What do you understand by “Big Society”?*

- Small state with formal/informal community.
- Let local people make decisions – power to make decisions but need resources
- Partnerships Co-operation
- Local people think where they live, government thinks in terms of local authorities/LEPs
- Need to couch RAF policies in evidence
- Rural village parish councils needs resources/help
- Who has responsibility for planning – that is where the power lies
- LEP’s (Essex/Kent/East Sussex) Strategic overview – RDA replacements
- Big Society – Saffron Walden Initiative Business Group – sub £5 per annum. Community partnership meeting with representatives from the board. The community who wanted to keep the board and joined in – now 40 people.
- Agenda 21 Groups – Saffron Groups link up rural villages – business formation/housing
- Business has big role to play in Big Society – job creation – Thames Gateway/Haven Gateway – cross section of membership.

Q2. *Will you need to change the way you work to achieve the community engagement intrinsic to “Big Society”?*

- Local authorities: used to partnership working - Sustainable Essex Partnership and structures. Dependent on resources. 10 county LSPs & county LSPs which could be built on.
- Difficulty in liking elected and non elected people
- CPRE – local base/membership. Potential to link in with LEPs – but still up in the air.
- CPRE group in Essex (Billericay) organised volunteers to do stiles/footpaths funded by county.
- Forestry Commission, should the government be delivering local entertainment – could be an enabling function
- East of England Business Group – need to change who they work with – local authorities/local communities; businesses involved in local sponsorship.

Q3. *How do you think your organisation could work with other service delivery organisations to satisfy the needs of rural communities?*

- Essex already does but could do more. Essex Rural Partnership.
- County has dedicated officer who is contractible by Parish Councils. Parish councils have to work with District Councils and County Councils.
- CPRE – not appropriate – links with rural communities.
- FC not appropriate
- Rural communities are ready to deliver/well placed for the Big Society but there are caveats: lack of cohesion/particular people with louder voice. Need support

Q4. In summary, do you believe that "Big Society" will help to fulfil the needs for rural communities?

Yes IF

– Rural areas already fulfil needs for Big Society. Village Agents caring lots of good practice.

Table 3 – Facilitator: Martin Collison

Q1. What do you understand by "Big Society"?

- Bottom up – theory/rhetoric concern
- BUT
 - How much real empowerment – top will control
 - Rhetoric led
 - Need strategic input
 - Will block social housing - *blockage*
 - Locals engaged don't need jobs - *blockage*
- Which budgets can be influenced eg coastal flooding
 - Local people trying to do it but regulations and policy gets in the way
- Have to let locals do things eg clear ditches, without forms, rules and regulations
 - Have to trust locals to deliver without this it will fail - *tension*
 - Need strategic overview of wider picture - *tension*

Q2. Will you need to change the way you work to achieve the community engagement intrinsic to "Big Society"?

- Two out of five of group won't be working at all
- Private sector will ignore and adapt – too busy to engage
- Councils will be working similarly, but need to find new ways to engage
- Activists will be the same – but many others despise them! (usual suspects)
- Consulting and engaging needs to look at going to others events not specific consultation events?
- Problem how to engage businesses – very few and thus will have to choose specific issues which will engage people or businesses
- Bottom up can be single interest lobbies who shout loudly
- Some councillors think they are elected to make decisions – Big Society is a threat to them!
- Big Society needs regional sharing/co-ordinate to drive it as well as local action!

Q3. How do you think your organisation could work with other service delivery organisations to satisfy the needs of rural communities?

- Needs real funding/resources to influence to get people engaged
- Maybe need to merge services to get efficiency savings but pulls against localism – *paradox*
- VCS often don't fully cover costs so in short term can deliver cheaply but not sustainable
- Too much reliance on the willing volunteers
- Need co-ordination across communities to share best practice – but costs time/money etc
- Need to support volunteers – make it easy, clear what needs are, clear on support, remove bureaucracy (eg CRB), good and free insurance cover for volunteers.
- Volunteering is not a job – if make it too difficult people won't do it; If job is too boring, dirty, etc people won't do it

Q4. In summary, do you believe that "Big Society" will help to fulfil the needs for rural communities?

Yes - if people believe it is real and support was real (local and regional support)

No – cannot apply everywhere – some areas will fail and this will destroy people's faith in it. Must

provide supportive environment.

Table 4 – Facilitator: Suzanne Harris

Q1. What do you understand by “Big Society”?

- People doing things in their own community
- Doing what we are already doing and more
- Volunteering – in groups & helping less able
- Delivering services which will be withdrawn – filling new gaps created by funding cuts
- Realising potential for sharing “back office” functions
- Needs up-skilling and funding
- “What is a volunteer?” An unpaid employee?
- Structured and formal volunteering
- Services not obliged to provide by statute no longer provided by state – delivered more locally, parishes share resources
- Parishes trading services with each other (without cash)
- May involve precept increases for Parish Councils
- Different areas – differing levels of ability to deliver
- Not just volunteers – social enterprises important
- Charities running local services – lower costs
- Localism

Q2. Will you need to change the way you work to achieve the community engagement intrinsic to “Big Society”?

- Parish C Precept up
- Local authority precept unchanged
- Working together – amalgamating services or trading services
- Sourcing local volunteers/workers
- Need pride in local area.
- Volunteers tend to come from limited demographic
- Need proper governance
 - Must ensure adequate support for communities to run services as volunteers, charities, social enterprises
 - Must meet legal requirements and standards eg Health and Safety
 - Need to up-skill people to enable delivery
- Sharing HR, Finance, Chief Executives
- Communicate better – sell benefits
- Ascertain who is available and what skills and interests
- Wider view of who potential volunteers might be
- Loosen restrictions/relax conditions
- Motivation

Q3. How do you think your organisation could work with other service delivery organisations to satisfy the needs of rural communities?

- Trade/barter services – parish councils
- Social enterprises
- Through facilitation – partnerships
- Work locally – rouse interest
- Benefits of local physical base/office

Q4. In summary, do you believe that "Big Society" will help to fulfil the needs for rural communities?

Yes –IF above concerns tackled

Table 5 – Facilitator: David Wood

Q1. What do you understand by "Big Society"?

- Wish list rather than fact
- Individuals for members and community
- Organisation – civic responsibility
- Opportunity – rural does not matter, urban centric
- Idealistic – money dependent/reaction
- Time pressures on individuals – need real belief in impact and will public sector listen?
- Is Big Society really small and local eg large farmers?
 - Rural communities will be dependent on local families/leaders
- Self interest is still major factor/ driver for volunteering

Q2. Will you need to change the way you work to achieve the community engagement intrinsic to "Big Society"?

- Need organisation structure to enable and provide the 'how we can'. Will support and encourage individuals.
- Rules, regulations, responsibilities overwhelming volunteers/clubs
- Rural village – spatial & community of interest, but school, shops, jobs not in village
- Town council/parish council – declaration of personal interests has lost willingness to be councillor ; lack of dedication not representative
- Experience and capacity and understanding of individuals
- Topic of interest that bind them are not in villages
- What events in village to bring together halls, schools, shops?
- Ability/capacity to operate
- Demographic composition of villages – incomers, older second homes. How to involve?
- This Big Society dependent in a "best effort" standard or present commercial "quality specified standard", eg litter picking - yes but elderly care - no.

Q3. How do you think your organisation could work with other service delivery organisations to satisfy the needs of rural communities?

- Unbounded scope of Big Society
- Need support and capacity building/training to late advantage of opportunity
- Lack of contested elections – no real sanctions on District Council/County Councils given foregone results of elections
- Smallness of villages/populations – limits capacity
- How and why & what is drive to volunteer?
- Small simple work – letter pack, build planting, prompted by vicar
- National Volunteering Day
- "Rights" require considerable support and training to take on services – legal/financial/standards
- Suffolk County Council – same standards but cheaper cost – quality?

Q4. In summary, do you believe that "Big Society" will help to fulfil the needs for rural communities?

Yes – IF
local support is provided