

Wednesday 8 June 2011

NFU Offices, Newmarket CB8 7SN

East of England Rural Forum

“Rural Broadband”

Minutes

Attendees

Laura Beardsell-Moore	Frances Bedding	John Buchanan
Rachel Carrington	John Carrick	Martin Collison
Nicola Currie	Richard Dix	Lloyd Felton
John Gili-Ross	John Goodwin	Suzanne Harris
Jeremy Hill	Pat Holtom	Edwin Jones
Jasmine Joolia	Callum Knowles	Mags Lambert
Julie Nelson	Deborah Ollett	Mick Page
Nick Philips	Sandy Shattock	John Simmons
Michael Snaith	Roger Turkington	Philip Wilson
David Wood		

Apologies

John Barker	Kate Belinis	Phil Bennett-Lloyd
Caron Britton	Henry Cordeaux	Keith Davies
Rosemary Farmer	Ed Gregory	Anne-Marie Hamilton
Brian Hayes	Philip Hayes	Edward Iveagh
Mike King	Greg Luton	Peter Martin
Corinne Meakins	Jo Middleton	Tim Passmore
Stuart Pile	Mike Seville	David Thompson
Chris Tombs	Hazel Williams MBE	Cindy Winn
Richard Woolley		

Speakers

Fran Bedding, External Funding Manager, Suffolk County Council

Roger Turkington, Director of Operations, Suffolk ACRE

Michael Snaith & Callum Knowles, Regional Network Solutions

Richard Dix, Rural Computing Limited

Lloyd Felton, Rural Broadband Partnership

1. Welcome – Pat Holtom

Pat welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. News & Updates

Pat Holtom, Chairman, explained to the Forum members that there was now no further Defra funding available due to government cuts. However, the EERF had enough money to run a further meeting in the current year.¹

¹ The next meeting was scheduled for **November (actual date tbc)**.

The Action Plan for the Rural White Paper has been issued and distributed electronically to all relevant government departments, ministers, MPs for the six counties and other people and is on the web site. If the members felt that there was anyone else who should be sent it, please forward it or advise a member of the secretariat. The Steering Group were meeting after this Forum meeting on the topic of how we move forward with the Action Plan, and again, if any member knew of an organisation who could help us with this to please let us know.

Defra would like to see continuity of sub-national rural and farming groups and a national rural network. The forum needs to consider whether we go alone or join FAB (Food & Agriculture Board) or LEPs. Pat said she would be grateful for the members' opinions and invited David Wood to provide more background information.

David Wood then explained that whilst Defra appreciate the work that rural forums and sustainable farming groups had done to date, it wants to create a combined Farming and Rural Network across the whole country with about 10 - 20 combined rural and farming groups. These would be self-supporting (ie no funding given) and would be made up from a mix of agri-food businesses, rural businesses in general and communities. In return, these groups would have direct contact with Defra ministers. However the forums and farming groups are able to continue as they are if they have the capacity to do so. The new Rural and Farming Groups need not necessarily be of a regional geographical area but being "appropriate" was important. The group chairman and minister would be able to communicate directly with each other. Expressions of Interest for such new groups should be submitted to Defra by 31 July 2011, with the network being operational by September 2011.

Martin Collison explained that an East of England sustainable farming and food group (SFFS) had been running for 10 years and in February the decision was taken that a revised group was needed - Food and Agriculture Board (FAB). While the likes of NFU, CLA would continue to be involved, more commercial business members would be an advantage. The first meeting would be held on 7 July and the question was whether the Rural Forum and FAB should join up to represent both Food & Agriculture but also general rural issues. It was felt a broadly based proposal, would be well received.

John Carrick asked if this was duplicating what was already in existence. Rachel Carrington replied that there was value of different approaches going before MPs with a unified message and opinion. A strong bid was required as it will be competitive and there is no geographical area restriction.

Learning and Skills Sub-group

Martin Collison told the Forum that there was not much to report on the Learning and Skills Sub-group since they last met in the spring. Martin felt that the Rural Enterprise Zone was something that this region could bid for and LSC would be key to this.

Martin also thanked John Simmons who was moving to Defra at the end of the month for his support and hard work over the last four years on the Sub-group.

3. The Importance of Rural Broadband to Communities

Fran Bedding made a presentation on the economic and social importance of broadband to rural communities and businesses. She talked about the impact that having a superfast broadband across Suffolk would have. It would certainly benefit tourism and leisure industries in particular but would also have a strong effect for example on learning, which would mean children got better GCSE's which would in turn result in a better workforce. Also with the advent of telemedicine, access to long term healthcare for older people in rural areas would allow them to stay in their own home longer.

Fran directed members of the Forum to visit the Better Broadband for Suffolk website hosted by www.choosesuffolk.com and look for the "tick" logo and register their support for the programme.

Roger Turkington from Suffolk ACRE then presented on its bid to the EEDA Songbird Programme. They had recently heard that they had won £250,000 for two projects. One would deliver wireless broadband to cover much of Suffolk Coastal District Council and Waveney Districts. They would be putting the work out to tender by July asking for bids from companies that could deliver the network to all rural areas within the specified zone.

The other project was to put a fibre network into the village of Parham. This had worked in a village in Lincolnshire and if it works in Parham, hopefully it can then be rolled out to other communities in Suffolk.

Martin Collison asked Fran how many tourists access the internet when visiting the area. Fran responded that there were no definite figures but that CLA have given feedback and the hotel and self-catering side of the tourism industry were definitely affected. Fran said there are many anecdotes available but she quoted an example of Stoke by Nayland golf club that normally hold a tournament but if the TV companies cannot get access to broadband in order to film it, the worry was whether that the club would not be selected in the future.

Nicola Currie of CLA stated that a generic way-leaves agreement has been drafted by the CLA and was available to all.

Julie Nelson asked whether churches had been contacted as they can be used as a high point for signal transmission. Fran replied that Norfolk used the inside of church towers as they did not require planning permission and it was something that would be thought about.

Sandy Shattock commented that 80% of the cost of putting in the network was the cost of digging up the road and related costs.

4. Rural Broadband, Partnerships and Funding

Michael Snaith and Callum Knowles of Regional Network Solutions presented on how organisations can work together and how this was critical to the success of a broadband project. They have worked with local authorities to look at broadband strategies for rural areas. The key ingredient to push this forward was to have a holistic approach and think carefully about why you need broadband. The government programme, BB Delivery UK (BDUK), wants to have community stakeholders involved and not just have councils working alone. They recommended looking at the Race Online 2012 on the internet as an example for more information.

John Carrick asked how far wireless broadband could reach. Callum stated that Cornwall had used convergence funding of over £100million to install a wireless network which gave access to 10% of the area.

5. Options for Businesses in Rural Areas

Richard Dix of Rural Computing Limited spoke of the difficulties of accessing the internet in remote areas. He told the Forum members about WiBE which is a small device that uses a mobile phone SIM card and can pick up a mobile phone signal via a 3G network (and soon to be 4G network) up to 20 miles away. He also discussed the benefits of using satellite systems in rural areas.

6. Setting up Rural Broadband for a Community

Lloyd Felton of Rural Broadband Partnership talked about his work with helping rural communities and research work he had undertaken in Essex. BDUK had given his organisation some funding to

develop the BDUK process, most importantly to register any broadband projects so that there was knowledge by communities about what was happening near to them. This was essential as it meant that there was less duplication of effort and expense for rural communities. To find out more or to register, see www.ruralbroadband.com.

7. Questions for the Panel

David Wood chaired the Q&A panel and asked why isn't broadband out there – is it the lack of demand or lack of money?

John Gili-Ross responded that British Telecom now has no effective competition in the UK and can choose where it puts in broadband and is unlikely to choose rural areas due to the cost of laying the fibre, etc.

Callum Knowles said that the price of getting fibre to the home is £31-38 billion as opposed to the £21 billion cost of fibre to the kerb. BT is still trying to improve but it is still not good enough. No one has the money to invest and it needs approximately 30% of people in an area to sign up for service in advance. That Sky may not replace its satellite when required is another problem to think about.

Michael Snaith said very few people are communicating and for example when Anglian Water are digging up the roads to replace water pipes, why not lay BB cables at the same time and share the cost as it doesn't cost much extra to put the cable in?

Fran said that when people can see what broadband can do for individuals and organisations it would become something that community would want to become involved in together.

Roger Turkington stated that at the moment we are only seeing the negatives about speed etc.

John Gili-Ross said that West Bergholt had managed to get the right supplier in and got great community support and it has been a very successful project.

Pat Holtom asked what were the advantages of the satellite system versus the WiBE system?

Richard Dix replied that latency was a problem for satellite system (ie time delay to the satellite and back). The mobile WiBE option is better but if you are not near a telephone mast you would have difficulty with it too.

Callum said you can't speed up the latency problem really but satellite is good out in North of Scotland for example. It really depends on what you want the service for.

Nick Phillips said that the cost of the HS2 high speed train will be around £21 billion but will take a lot more than that in reality. Broadband would cost £31 billion and would actually be beneficial to many more people and communities.

Callum pointed out that 80,000 new businesses will be created by putting the money into broadband than into rail lines and any pressure that could be put on the government for this should be

David Wood pointed out that the rural forums nationally have continually pushed the broadband issue with the government and would keep doing so.

Sandy Shattock said that the Lord Erroll had found that Defra were not getting their EU claims from farmers in on time as they were unable to get a speedy enough BB connection and the returns were timing out.

John Goodwin said he had just received an email saying that Suffolk County Council was investing £10 million into Broadband.

Callum Knowles said the funding should be ring-fenced for broadband only as it has been known that council money ends up getting eaten away for other things unless the money is protected.

John Simmons asked whether with all the technological changes, are we always going to be catching up?

John Gili-Ross said that we have to catch up and improve from our current position of number 33 country for BB back up to number 2-3 in the world. BT has promised £30 million investment this year but it is not enough to make a significant difference.

Philip Wilson stated that massive private sector input was surely required.

Callum replied that the government needs to invest but it requires long term investment.

Pat asked Lloyd Felton about whether he was involved with RDPE funded LAGs who had itemised broadband? Lloyd said he was in contact with parishes but now those organisations will liaise with directly with RDPE.

“Is it true that you can only use public sector money in one area?” asked Philip Wilson.

Fran said it was a bit vague but may be that if you were moving from one stage to another and had investment for stage 1 to stage 2 and then wished to progress to stage 3 it may be acceptable. If you were using investment to get from stage 1 – stage 3 and needed more money to complete it, it would probably be unlikely that it would be acceptable.

David then concluded events by thanking the panel for their presentations and participation in the panel. He explained that the topic had been chosen because broadband had seemed to be the most important subject on the Rural White Paper and he hoped the members had found it useful. The quality and extent of the debate certainly reinforced the perception that high quality broadband was critical to rural communities.