

Wednesday 9 March 2011

NFU Offices, Newmarket CB8 7SN

“Implications of Demographic Change in Rural Communities”

Minutes

Attendees

John Barker	Frances Bedding	Kate Belinis
Richard Bindless	John Buchanan	Martin Collison
Marie Francis	Jim Gledhill	John Goodwin
Moira Groborz	Anne Marie Hamilton	Suzanne Harris
Brian Hayes	Philip Hayes	Louise Hobbs
Pat Holtom	Edwin Jones	Jasmine Joolia
Mags Lambert	Corinne Meakins	Mick Page
Stuart Pile	Helen Reeve	Kate Sayer
John Simmons	Andrew Thurston	David Wood
Richard Woolley		

Apologies

John Atherton	Martin Aust	Laura Beardsell-Moore
Mick Carr	John Carrick	Rachel Carrington
Nicola Currie	Rosemary Farmer	Ed Gregory
Edward Iveagh	Greg Luton	Jo Middleton
Deborah Ollett	Tim Passmore	Nick Philips
Sandy Shattock	Hazel Williams	

Speakers

Andrew Thurston, Rose Regeneration

Louise Hobbs, Age UK

Moira Groborz, Essex Rural Housing Enabler, RCC of Essex

Helen Reeve, Vice-Chairman Agriculture and Rural Affairs, National Young Farmers Club

1. Welcome – Pat Holtom

Pat welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. News & Updates

Chair of Chairs Meeting with Richard Benyon, Defra Minister for Rural Affairs

Suzanne Harris had attended the last Chair of Chairs meeting with the Minister on 3rd March. All of the England regions were represented at the meeting and Richard Benyon appeared very interested and invited all representatives to give their views. Suzanne had expressed her view that the Rural Forums should remain in place until there was more clarity on the current governmental organisation changes. The minister was only there for an hour so there was not much opportunity for discussion but there was an impression of optimism for the future as the Defra officer who was also present tabled a document which detailed future meetings. Suzanne had seen sight of a document which will be circulated to members when it becomes available in

an electronic format¹. Essentially each area should carry on as they wish and they will be recognised by Defra. Rural affairs would be covered by any interested groups in the area, despite that meaning that there is potential overlapping of interest. There would only be one annual meeting with the Minister with provision for virtual meetings in between but it was felt that by the Chairs that this would be insufficient. The Defra rural team has increased and Suzanne met some of the new officers. A new government rural statement is to be written by Tony Williamson whose role on rural affairs will be replaced by John Coleman. Also, Becky Gill has been appointed to focus on Broadband issues.

Corrine Meakins asked about the RDPE but it is as yet unknown what is happening. John Simmons stated that Jim Paice (Defra farming minister) had released a statement last week and it was available together with questions and answers on the RDPE website. RDPE wasn't mentioned as one of the new team and John Simmons is to give Martin Collison a newsletter for circulation that explains RDPE changes.

Richard Bindless remarked that there was an issue on how the Rural Forum would be able to maintain its influencing role with all the recent changes, new LEPs, etc. Martin Collison said that if there are 20 different groups meeting the Minister, a clear voice is not going to be heard and it was up to us as a group to get together and write a paper detailing facts and try to drive the point home to the Minister.

Stuart Pile stated that the transport team in Hertfordshire CC had shrunk hugely and now there was only one representative to speak to the DfT in London and without the LEPs backing, our voice will not be heard. Andrew Thurston explained how some LEPs have joined together to represent LEPs in East of England and work with other LEPs in the likes of Lincolnshire, Cornwall and other areas. Kate Sayer mentioned that for example Peterborough/Kings Lynn LEPs were mostly urban so a close eye would be required to ensure the rural interest was taken into account in such LEPs.

Pat suggested that some LEPs representatives be invited to attend an EERF meeting and that this matter would be discussed at the steering group meeting which was following this meeting.

Learning and Skills Sub-group

Martin Collison gave the Forum an update on the Sub-group. He said that a meeting that in mid January had focussed on feeding into the Rural White Paper Action Plan. Skills funding is changing and is moving in the direction that we have asked for over many years, namely to allow decisions to be made by training providers, which will allow courses to be provided that are wanted. However, as there is now a 25% cut in funding, providers will now have to decide on what courses are needed and urban areas and employers' voices will be heard more which will make it harder to provide more expensive rural requirements. We need to come up with ideas to make the rural voice heard.

Housing Sub-group

Martin Aust was not present so **Moirá Groborz** gave a brief update on the Housing Sub-group. The last meeting to be held was on 26 November and the one scheduled for last week was cancelled. Attendance at the Sub-group has dropped significantly and there is some concern about this.

Sustainable Food & Farming

Marie Francis chairs this group that holds one meeting a year. No funding as yet for the newly set up Food and Agriculture Board (FAB) but there are a group of partners working together plus a representative from each LEP to participate meaning there are 5 representatives on the Board. The secretariat will be a group at the centre of contemporary agriculture and there will be an 18 months interim period until all the current changes become clear. The first meeting of FAB will be held on 1 May 2011 but it is unknown who the first chair.

¹ Subsequent announcement of the creation of a network of Rural and Farming Groups.

Rural White Paper

David Wood spoke to the meeting about the Vibrant Rural Communities paper which is EERF's plan to ensure that rural concerns are heard by the government. We are currently in the process of putting together an action plan to take this forward and are using workshops attended by a wide range of organisations and individuals to get a variety of input. The last workshop is being held on 18 March at Wyboston Lakes. The cut off for comments is 23 March 2011 and David invited members who were unable to attend the workshops but who wished to comment to ensure they did so by email before the cut off date of 23 March. The Action Plan would be published by the end of March.

Pat told the Forum members that there was a proposal for a Broadband Steering Group to be set up as it was the most important and recurring topic in our white paper and recent action planning workshops. It was also one of Defra's four priorities. Pat asked that if anyone wished to join this Steering Group, please speak to David Wood.

3. Demographic Changes within Rural Areas

Andrew Thurston of Rose Regeneration then took the floor to present on the demographic changes in rural areas.

There are two accepted definitions of what the term rural means. One is by the Office of National Statistics and is based on settlements less than 10,000 population. Using this, the 2001 Consensus shows that 20% of the population live in rural areas. The other definition is that used by Defra which shows 40% of the population live rurally. Regardless of which definition is used, generally speaking the East of England follows the national trend with a low number of young adults living in rural areas but a high number of 65 years and over living there. Population growth in the East of England is a lot higher compared to the national total. However, it has to be remembered that different rural areas have differing needs as well as differing age groups and should be treated individually.

4. Age UK

Louise Hobbs of the recently merged Age UK (Age Concern and Help the Aged) made a presentation that detailed some of the issues facing older people within rural communities. She gave some background to the charity and the range of work that they did, where some arms of the organisation worked in the community organising events such as Lunch Clubs, etc whilst others focussed more on policy and fundraising. However, all areas had a common agenda and having merged to form Age UK now had a more powerful voice.

There are now more people in the UK aged over 60 than there are aged under 18. Over 12 million people are of pension age and almost 12,000 are aged 100. Older people tend not to claim benefits for a variety of reasons but 1 in 6 pensioners in rural areas are on low income.

There are many issues facing older people but the key ones that need to be addressed are access to health and social care services, lack of money, work and learning and equality and human rights and poor recognition of mental health problems eg depression, isolation

5. Questions for the Panel

Moira Groborz explained that RCC of Essex had sent out housing surveys to try to get input from the rural communities themselves. Out of the 279 households (471 people) that responded, 67% of them were below 55 years. Older people were not completing the surveys so the reason why was something to be investigated further.

Helen Reeve said that the main issue for young people within rural communities was affordable housing and that it needed to be addressed to sustain the community.

Richard Woolley pointed out that life expectancy was really the issue of housing in the rural areas. Moira said that there was a difficulty for older people to downsize as they got older in these communities as, say, they may have bought their council house under the Right to Buy scheme but now need a bungalow but the Housing Associations are not interested.

Anne-Marie Hamilton raised the point that Louise had mentioned in her presentation that older people tended not to claim all the benefits they were entitled to and quite often that was due to people having occupational pensions that made them ineligible to claim benefits. Louise Hobbs said she would refer this issue to Age UK.

John Barker raised the issue on the reliance on volunteers and the few who do volunteer tend to have to take the lead.

Jasmine Joolia asked Helen Reeve how to encourage younger people into volunteering. Helen Reeve says a lot of young farmers help their local community through fundraising schemes etc and they need to be shown appreciation for the skills they bring. Martin Collison said he was an ex-young farmer and once you start volunteering, you tend to continue to support and therefore engagement when young is critical.

Richard Bindless said that people in later life should not be viewed as out to pasture but as having something valuable to put back into society.

Kate Sayer said that the young rather than older volunteers are struggling to let go of the apron strings and we should use young people's skills.

Anne Marie Hamilton stated that one of her concerns if you want to use volunteers is who is going to pay for them?

John Barker stated that the cost of being a volunteer can mean that it is limited to the affluent as they are the only ones who can afford to help.

Louise Hobbs said that there are also hidden costs in having volunteers. It wasn't just a case of there was a free member of staff as you had to train, manage and support them too.

Corinne Meakins asked what Age UK was doing about the Health White Paper. Louise Hobbs said that Age UK would respond to the White Paper via their central Policy Department. Corinne was asking whether Health & Well Being Boards have been set up and if so shouldn't EERF be involved.

Stuart Pile said that with the emerging Localism Policy, the government is not leading and it is down to mostly the county level to act as the money is at county and district levels.

Kate Belinis said that ACRE represents Localism; ethos is decentralisation and the process of Big Society is the outcome.

Jim Gledhill says the Association of Town and Parish Councils also make grants to community organisations.

Mick Page say Essex also have funding for voluntary organisations but that the organisations have to change the way they operate and work together and put in joint bids.

Stuart Pile said that money has to be seen to be spent properly.

Anne Marie Hamilton said that working in partnership had won funding but now we have to get funding back to grassroots.

Richard Woolley mentioned the Asset Transfer Programme and how it was simply a lack of confidence that prevented communities from taking over responsibility for a community building.

Moira Groborz said with regards to affordable housing, the real issue is that an average house price in rural areas can be ten times rural salaries. The definition of Affordable Housing is anything that is not open market. Tenancies can be flexible: rent levels that housing associations can charge can be up to 80% of market rate and housing benefit is changing.

Helen Reeve commented that there was a need for the location of affordable housing to be right too. For example young farmers start work at 4.30am and there are not many buses around to take them to work at that time in the morning.

David Wood asked how can we use all the current changes to our advantage to get affordable housing. Moira made the point that houses can be rented too and not only bought and people should not feel under pressure to buy a home. Martin Collison commented that sometimes, despite landowners being prepared to go ahead and sell land and build houses, the planning department prevents it from happening. Jim Gledhill pointed out that in Europe people mostly rent. Villages have lost a lot of facilities due to people with second homes who buy the houses and push the prices up but who are not there all the time to spend money in local shops and pubs. Indeed Philip Hayes quoted from his own experience where he bought a two-up, two-down for £30k that is now worth £317k as 25% of the houses are second homes.

Louise Hobbs said older people can't maintain their homes but it was hard for them to give up family homes even if they are now living there alone.

Pat asked the panel which one policy they would like to see put in place if they could? Moira said she would like to see some incentives to landowners to give up the land to build affordable housing. Helen would like an increase in skills and to receive on-going training to maintain them. Louise said that it would be ideal to have communities with all ages in them but particularly those in later life. Andrew Thurston would like to the roles of LEPs to be defined so there is clarity for communities.

Martin raised the point that employment and skills should not be focussed only on the young but should be lifelong but how do we do that? Louise felt that it was employers' responsibility with all the new technology to ensure that they kept skills up to date throughout an employee's working life.

Pat thanked all the speakers for their presentations and thanked members for contributing to a very stimulating discussion.

The next meeting will be held on **8 June 2011**, topic and venue TBC.

EERF Annual General Meeting

The Chairman, Pat Holton, gave an overview of the three events that have been held over the year. The first of which was on the subject of Rural Development and was held at Shuttleworth Park and discussion was held on planning, the increasing awareness of environmental issues, and the benefits of social enterprises such as Marston Vale. In June, we went to Wimpole Estate and the subject was Estates, Tourism and Community in the East of England. As well as a tour of the Wimpole Estate, it featured a talk by the Director of the Museum of East Anglian Life - museum and a social enterprise - which made for a very interesting day. The final meeting had been the one at Newmarket Racing School on the subject of Big Society and Localism and had given an outline of the government's current thinking at that time and the devolving public sector power.

All of these meetings were followed by round table discussions and the minutes are all available

on the EERF website (www.eerf.org.uk). Pat thanked members of the Sub-Groups for their valuable input and stated that she would welcome new ideas and topics for EERF activities.

Next year will be a struggle financially for the Forum to survive as funding will be gone but we will continue to look for funding from other sources. If any members have any ideas on this, please let us know.

The Rural White Paper which we have been working on throughout the year had been published and the associated Action Plan would be ready at the end of March and will be then distributed widely.

Pat said it had been her great pleasure to work with Suzanne Harris and Martin Collison, her vice chairmen and she thanked them and the secretariat for their hard work.

Pat asked if there were any further questions from the floor and John Barker asked if there were any failures this year. The response was that we had been unable to cover every topical area and obviously the lack of funding was an issue. Also getting MPs engaged in the Rural White Paper had proved difficult. A parliamentary outreach team may be a useful way forward.

David Wood stated that Pat Holtom had been nominated to re-stand as Chairman and this had been proposed by John Carrick and seconded by Frances Bedding. There being no other candidates, the Pat Holtom was re-elected **nem con**.

Both of the Vice Chairs had agreed to stand again. Suzanne Harris had been proposed by Pat Holtom and seconded by Richard Woolley, whilst Martin Collison had been proposed by Anne-Marie Hamilton and seconded by David Wood. Both Vice Chairs were duly re-elected **nem con**.

Close of Meeting