

EERF Steering Group: Minutes

8 September 2010 at 10.00 am

GO East Offices, Cambridge

Present

Pat Holtom (Chairman & Norfolk)
Suzanne Harris (Vice Chairman & Essex)
Martin Collison (Vice Chairman & L&S Subgroup)
Mick Carr (GO East)
Martin Aust (Housing Subgroup)
Kate Belinis (Hertfordshire)
Frances Bedding (Suffolk)
Anne Marie Hamilton (Bedfordshire)
John Simmons (EEDA)
David Wood (Secretariat)

Apologies

Kirsten Bennett (Cambridgeshire)
Nicola Lloyd (CRC)

1. Minutes of meeting on 11 June 2010

Subject to the correction of the name of the Essex Councillor to John Jowers, the minutes of the meeting held on 11 June 2010 were **agreed**.

2. Actions and matters arising not on Agenda

End of Year Report for 2009/10

David informed the steering group that this had still not been revised and submitted to Defra. The steering group felt that it was still important to report on the work of the Forum last year and requested that this be done by early October.

3. Regional Rural White Paper

The group was pleased to note that the full version and also a summary version had been finalised and distributed widely to members and other key organisations. They identified further names for the Secretary to distribute the report to within the region and to some key national figures.

Regarding the potential issuing of a press release to the media, this would need sensitive handling given the acknowledgement of support from EEDA and the embargo on expenditure by public bodies on publicity and communications. John Simmons asked that David Wood discuss the idea with Charlie Kitchener at EEDA before any press release was issued.

The current uncertainty had prevented the drafting of the Action Plan in support of the recommendations in the White Paper. It was hoped that this would be able to be drafted late this calendar year for distribution in early 2011.

The Steering Group reiterated its support for sub-regional events in support of the White Paper and David confirmed that budget was available to support these.

4. EERF Development

National Network of Forum Chairs

The steering group noted that the East of England and North West Forums had jointly drafted a paper on affordable housing. This was part of a larger paper in support of the planned meeting with Defra Rural Affairs minister, Richard Benyon on 21st September. David expressed his

appreciation of information and advice received particularly from both Martin's. The group were keen to ensure that the meeting and discussion of the paper conveyed to the minister the value of rural forums and the benefit of their work across the country.

Learning and Skills Sub-Group

Martin C informed the group that the next meeting would be on 4 October. Current key activities were to respond to several formal consultations issued by the government on investment and priorities for skills. The most important one was that concerned with identifying the business priorities for skills ie which and how skill development should receive support and funding. With David, he had attended a meeting with EEDA convened by John and discussed its response and that of the RDA network. He felt that there was value for the Forum to respond separately from that provided by EEDA. Additionally, NIACE had produced an extensive 35 page response. After discussion with David Wood, he proposed that there should be a joint EERF/Rural Action East response identifying the importance of rural businesses, rural people and the outreach challenges for skills and training. The formal deadline was 14 October but it was highly desirable to submit a response before the end of September. He would then ask the full meeting of the L&S Sub-Group on 4 October to endorse the draft submission.

The group then discussed the impact and potential problems arising from the government's plans to increase the size of contracts for training providers. This would lead to the exclusion of Third Sector groups and smaller suppliers. Also the expectation of some match funding from businesses would severely handicap the ability of small rural businesses without the financial resources to take advantage of any government scheme. The Steering Group approved of this approach and suggested a short sharp response, say 6 pages, would be appropriate.

Affordable Rural Housing Sub-Group

Martin A described the work of the Housing Sub-Group and its plans for its next meeting on 22 September. Much of the new government's proposed changes to provision of affordable housing would have a significant effect on the situation in rural areas. Most of these points had been picked up in the briefing paper for the meeting with the Defra minister. Overarching concerns were the expected ~42% cut in the HCA budget and the risk of a double dip recession. Together these would reduce the amount of housing that could be built and reduce the number of available sites for development. The Housing Associations were using a variety of channels to make their points to government and mitigate the worst impact of the proposed policies. In summary, the major concern was the likely serious decrease in the number of affordable houses built over the next year or two.

Communication

The Steering Group noted that draft contributions for a newsletter had been submitted to the secretary and requested that they go out in October.

5. EERF Planning

The Steering Group discussed ideas and timings for the next regular meeting with members and also for a members' regional conference early in the next year. These should build on the ideas in the White Paper and put them into the context of emerging policy and financial decisions by the government.

November Members' Meeting

It was decided that the meeting on **4 November** would be on the theme of "Localism and the Big Society – Opportunities for Rural Communities".

Action Point: **David** to invite Secretary of State, Eric Pickles, to be the keynote speaker.

The meeting should provide for extensive round table discussion on the implications of the policy and how it would impact on rural communities. The discussion should focus on what are the issues, what is the Forum response, what actions should be taken by whom.

Following the table discussions, there should be a short presentation on a local view of the impact of the emerging policy. It was suggested that Neil Stott of Keystone Developments in Thetford or Richard Powell from Sustainability East could present this response. Given the expected announcement on comprehensive spending review and the financial cuts, it may be possible to invite a spokesman from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) or urban forum to present an analysis. Kate Belinis suggested that Ben Page from MORI could be a useful speaker.

Action Point: **David** to book a Newmarket venue for event.

Action Point: **Suzanne** to drop brief note to Eric Pickles regarding his potential attendance at the forum meeting.

Regional Conference and AGM

It was agreed that this meeting would be held on **9 March 2011**. The AGM would be a short, sharp activity at the beginning of the meeting and then followed by the more interesting discussion meeting.

It was decided that the theme for this meeting would be demographic change as discussed in the White Paper. This would be able to pick up a range of specific ideas covering social exclusion, affordable housing, access to services, development of communities and their support for service provision.

Further details for this meeting would be discussed and agreed at the next meeting of the Steering Group on 12 January.

6. RAE Secretariat

The meeting noted that budget had been agreed between Defra and the Government Offices. Rural Action East would be invoicing against this budget quarterly.

Action Point: **David** to update the Service Level Agreement and obtain signatures for himself, Pat Holtom as Chairman and Mick Carr.

Action Point: **David** to distribute the SLA to all members of Steering Group for their information and approval.

7. DONM & AOB

The Steering Group agreed to meet on **12 January 2011** and requested that Mick Carr book a room for their use at Eastbrook.

Suzanne and Martin Collison reported back on their attendance at the launch of the Rural Coalition Paper at Westminster. They were surprised at the lack of key influential people at the event. Overall the paper had no surprises although the points made was very good and worthy of reiteration.

Action Point: **David** to arrange for the paper to be posted to the EERF website.

There being no other business, the meeting **closed**.