

Network Update

Edition 1
April 2003



Staff Briefing

RCC Network? What is it?

The West Midlands Rural Community Council (RCC) Network is made up of four Community Councils in the West Midlands region and represented by your Chief Officer:

- Community Council of Shropshire
- Community Council of Staffordshire
- Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire
- Warwickshire Rural Community Council

The Network has been developed in response to the Governments trend towards regionalisation. It aims to ensure that rural needs and issues are represented to regional bodies, including Government office, in an informed and co-ordinated way.

Purpose:

- Assist RCC's in combating disadvantage and enhancing service delivery to local communities
- Reflect the interests of rural communities to rural partners
- Facilitate the engagement of local communities in the regional strategic agenda
- Share expertise and good practice amongst the four RCC's
- Build capacity of the four RCC's to deliver services with equity across the region

This newsletter aims to give you a flavour of this work and demonstrate how the RCC's have been working in partnership to deliver projects on the ground.

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Finding an identity

It was about time the Network had a logo and an identity. The easiest and quickest way to start raising the Network profile and provide a visual image, was to design independent stationary.

Well, here it is.....what do you think? My hat is raised to those staff at local RCC's who are responsible for publicity, its not an easy job.



Please make sure that you use this stationary if you produce any work on behalf of the Network. There will be copies at your local office.

Delegate packs have also been produced, predominantly for our forthcoming launch event. This publicity material has been produced using funds from Lloyds TSB.

Facts:

- * The Network distributed £237,460.91 in response to FMD crisis
- * Network has secured £39,814.06 to conduct a Regional Audit of Community Buildings
- * The Network distributed £52,078.55 to support village halls with marketing activities





Advantage West Midlands **Rural Support Agencies Fund**

The Network was invited by Advantage West Midlands during February 2002 to manage and administer the distribution of £250,000 grants across the Region. This fund was identified as a result of research into the impact of the Foot and Mouth Disease crisis on voluntary and community organisations. The grants were aimed to help voluntary and community organisations, that had been most badly affected, plan and develop their services post foot and mouth and improve their long term sustainability. Eligible organisations were those that could demonstrate that they had both lost income and experienced a significant increase in demand for their services as a direct result of the crisis.

Grants of up to £10,000 were available to support the following services:

- crisis support

- relationship counselling
- money and benefits advice
- youth mentoring
- direct services which help people overcome barriers to employment

Grants above this amount up to a maximum of £20,000 were allocated in exceptional circumstances to county or regional groups.

The grants were intended to resource activity in the following areas:

- business planning
- fundraising strategy development

- marketing and promotion
- ICT capacity building
- new business development

The RCC's worked in partnership, with Community First as the accountable Body, to deliver this grant without any underspend despite very tight time-scales. Local workers from each RCC supported projects to ensure organisations set achievable targets, managed their budgets, retained necessary evidence and attain the outcomes.

There was a 2 stage application process, assessed by an independent panel, including representatives of the rural voluntary and community sector and key regional agencies.

Thanks to all the RCC staff

RSAF Impact in the Voluntary and Community Sector

"At the beginning of 2003 we secured enough funding to sustain the service for 12 months and to renew all the coordinator contracts for a further 12 months"

Rural Stress Support Network

The project has been hugely successful with 21 organisations having spent between £10-20k on developing their infrastructure within 6 months. Projects focused on activities to increase their sustainability and enhance delivery for isolated, rural communities.

In summary, organisations have highlighted the positive impact of the capital grant that aimed to develop the infrastructure of their core business. The funds have enabled organisations to address problems, review systems, explore opportunities and develop services, unlike the majority of funding opportunities that want to invest in innovative new projects. Projects included consultants for business planning, additional staff hours for strategic development, web pages, IT facilities, finance systems, mobile phones, laptops, publicity.

West Midlands Area of Young Farmers Clubs purchased a mobile exhibition trailer to assist outreach.



If you would like more details please contact Michelle O'Neill but there will shortly be a final report at your local RCC, detailing impact.

Regional Audit of Community Buildings

The Network has just secured £39k from AWM to carry out a region wide audit of community buildings with Community First as the lead. The purpose is to identify their current and potential role in community regeneration. With approximately 1000 Community Buildings across the region each with the potential to play a key part in community regeneration, the RCC's will be working in partnership to collate this huge amount of data and input to an accessible, dedicated database.

The project will also provide consultancy time to develop a strategic framework and scoping exercise to establish the strategic role for multi purpose centres. Rachel Billings of Community First is taking a lead on this part of the work.

If you would to know more, speak to your local contact: Jean Garner (Shropshire), Tim Scott (Staffordshire), Bryan Haines (H&W), Mavis Wilkins (Warwickshire).

The key planned outcomes are: strategic framework for Community Buildings; development of strategic themes for multi-purpose centres; comprehensive mapping exercise of services centred on Community Buildings across the region and accessible, standard information available.

Regional Strategic Engagement Fund

The Regional Strategic Engagement Fund was established by RAWM in September 2001 with funding from Advantage West Midlands as a "strategic " fund operating at a regional level. The fund aims to:

- * provide capacity building support to regionally and sub regionally significant communities to enable them to engage in regional policy and strategy development
- * facilitate community and voluntary sector engagement in the development and management of Regeneration Zones

The Network bid successfully under the health and regeneration theme for funding of £35,000 for one year. The funding recognised the role of the RCCs in both supporting the health and well being of rural communities and in helping to sustain thriving, economically viable, rural commu-

nities. The project managed by Cathy Jackson Read (a consultant to the Network) aimed:

- * To influence the regional agenda relating to the social, economic and environmental health of communities in rural settings
- * To develop the capacity of RCCs to advocate on rural issues effectively and deliver the rural regeneration agenda across the region with equity.

The activity undertaken with rural communities had several strands:

- * information on local and regional structures and routes to engagement
- * consultation on four key themes; *transport, housing, social enterprise, voluntary sector support infrastructure bodies*
- * research into the barriers to engage-

ment for organisations working with rural communities.

An event for RCC staff and trustees funded by Lloyds TSB was held in July 2002 to inform RCCs of the benefits of regional engagement, highlight regional agencies and mechanisms for input and engage RCC staff and trustees with the RSEF programme and its themes.

Similar events were held in each RCC area over the year, drawing together representatives from county and local organisations to participate in gaining information on local and regional issues/structures and routes for engagement and contributing to the formulation of position statements on the four themes. Over one hundred individuals and organisations across the region participated in these events.

Policy Papers

One of the key activities undertaken by the Network, led by Cathy Jackson Read, was to write and disseminate policy papers on the four key themes identified above.

Each RCC drew together information from across the region to develop an RCC Network perspective on one of these themes:

- * Social Enterprise; Alison Chambers Community First
- * Transport; Malcolm Kimber, Shropshire RCC
- * Housing; Andy Holden, Staffordshire RCC
- * VS infrastructure bodies; Alison Chappell Warwickshire RCC

"The policy Papers will be launched at the Network's forthcoming promotional event on Tuesday 3 June 2003 at the Lakeside Conference Centre, Birmingham"

These position statements will be used to respond to consultation documents, input to regional bodies and highlight rural issues with key partners. When all documents have gone to print, I will have copies of each and an Executive summary for distribution.

Telephone Survey



The purpose of the survey was to identify:

- at what level organisations in predominantly rural areas across the region are currently engaged with regional bodies and agencies
- barriers to regional engagement
- how access could be increased

The initial survey of gathered data from 33 rural voluntary and community organisations throughout the West Midlands during

June/July 2002:

Herefordshire & Worcestershire	11
Shropshire	6
Staffordshire	8
Warwickshire	8

The organisations contacted represented a broad spread of voluntary and community organisations from environmental and conservation groups to organisations providing community care services.

A follow up survey will be conducted in April/May 2003 involving some of the original contacts and comparing their perspective with those of urban agencies in an attempt to identify more clearly whether barriers to engagement are specific to rural communities.

This work has been carried out by Cathy Jackson Read and Maddy Sumner. I do have a copy of the final report if you would find this interesting.



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Who is the Network Co-ordinator?

Yes, you've probably guessed by now, considering I have plastered my name everywhere....Michelle O'Neill.

The Network secured funds primarily through Lloyds TSB to appoint a Network co-ordinator for a few hours each week and I was appointed further to a proposal by Community First. The majority of this role, is to act as the main contact for the Network, record

meetings, drive forward actions, establish coherent systems and practices and develop project ideas on their behalf.

As you can see from the contact details above, I am based at Community First in Malvern. My wider role, as some of you will already know, is Development Manager within Learning and Skills. I look forward to hearing from you.

Village Hall Capacity Building

The Community Council of Shropshire, on behalf of the RCC Network, successfully attracted £80,500 from Advantage West Midlands to deliver a 'village hall recovery programme' post the foot and mouth crisis. Each Community Council currently has a budget of £5000 to arrange specialist support and training for village halls at a local level. This may include developing a fundraising plan, business plan or marketing plan and can be one to one support or group training based. Contact your local Village Halls adviser for more information.

The project also made £50,000 available as a grant pot to assist village halls with marketing activities. In partnership with RCC's, the Community Council of Shropshire have distributed £52,078.55 to 101 village halls across the region. Although all the funds were allocated, demand was still extremely high with a further 79 village halls unable to access financial support. For more information about the process or outcome of this project, please contact Jean Garner at the Community Council of Shropshire.

Staff Networking

Don't forget there is probably someone doing a very similar job as you in another partner Rural Community Council. The contact details are above, so give them a call and find out....'two heads are better than one' and you never know they may have great ideas!

The Network are keen for staff to Network and have begun to identify areas for cross working. A project team has already been established and will be meeting soon to discuss how we can work better together and learn from each other regarding corporate activities (eg. the database).