

Network Update

Edition 3
March 2004



Staff Briefing

Update from Network member— Julia Baron



It has been another hugely busy six months, with the Network negotiating new work, contributing to national consultation, working with regional partners to agree standards of service and delivering current contracts.

I have been given the pleasure of updating you in this edition. My name is Julia Baron and I'm the Chief Executive for the Community Council of Shropshire. Currently we employ 30 staff and have a focus to work particularly closely with partner infrastructure bodies in response to the Governments voluntary sector review. Check out our website www.shropshire-rcc.org.uk

The Network is particularly pleased to see the development of several working groups across the region and acknowledge the rewards already gained. To this end, we are excited about the possibilities for the Networks website in encouraging understanding about the Network, greater staff liaison and sharing of knowledge.

Our profile continues to grow at a regional level, which is thanks to all those who support the Network in achieving it's goals. Recently we have accepted an offer from Government Office West Midlands to deliver the DEFRA support programme, which will include supporting local infrastructure consortia with their development plans and presentation for ACU main spend funds.

Your views are always welcomed and we encourage you to offer feedback directly to Michelle, who will bring this to the attention of the Network,

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Facts:

- * Secured £17,700 from ACU Early Spend Fund
- * Obtained £25,000 to deliver DEFRA support programme
- * Held a successful staff networking day
- * Submitted bid to the Carnegie UK Trust

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I may be able to help point you to the right member of staff at each RCC, so please feel free to ask me:

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RSEF 2 Progress

In the last edition we were pleased to announce the Networks success in securing over £171,000 to assist the rural voluntary and community sector to engage with regional dialogue.

Although the funding is for three years, we have agreed to meet specific deliverables each financial year and as we have reached the end of year one, thought we would bring you up to speed.

Obviously the Network website is up and running thanks to RSEF 2. Over the next two years, this will be further developed

1. in response to the feasibility study being conducted (ACU Early Spend project) addressing ways to improve on line consultation
2. to enable Board members to network and be kept up to date with developments
3. to accommodate the consultation with the planned Rural Citizens Panel
4. by introducing an RCC staff search database—find out who to talk to in other areas
5. by enabling interactive networking between staff on key rural issues
6. Providing a Network calendar of events

Please regularly visit to keep up to date with the information added to the staffroom library. You will find copies of the all the network funding proposals for information.

The Network is establishing itself as a body for producing informative policy papers that aim to make key issues understandable for the sector and provide a regional picture for influential agencies. In addition to the

Rural Housing, Rural Transport, Voluntary Sector Infrastructure and Social Enterprise papers, in the next week we will see the production of:

- **The changing face of rural communities**
- **The Regional Rural Affairs Forum**
- **Village Halls in the West Midlands**

This financial year will see the beginning of 3 new papers including discussion about how the VCS has a role in economic activity, engaging the sector in learning and skills and practical steps for 'including disadvantaged people'.

For more information about the RSEF project, please visit the website.

Rural Citizens Panel

The Network has submitted a regional bid to the Carnegie UK Trust, with the Community Council of Staffordshire acting as accountable body.

The full bid can be seen in the staff room library of the website. The bid is seeking funds to support the development of a Rural Citizens Panel, with an aim to provide an additional opportunity to consult with rural communities.

It is anticipated that 50-100 individuals from across the region (such as shopkeepers, parishioners, young people) will join the panel and offer their views on regional planning via the website and planned conferences.

www.wmrccn.org.uk

Password access to the staff room available from Michelle

COMPACT

The national compact between the Countryside Agency and ACRE, on behalf of the 38 RCC's, was signed on 19 Nov 2003. The Network recently spent a day working with the Countryside Agency to regionalise this COMPACT into a set of actions all parties feel able to achieve at a local level. This focuses very much on relationships and partnership working.

The draft regional compact is available to download at the website; staffroom; library

What's happening next?

In addition to delivering at a local level, RCC's have committed to see the on going development of the Network. Not only is the Network addressing ways for supporting the sector and encouraging greater participation but it is also looking at how RCC infrastructure can be improved with equity across the region to improve service delivery.

Over the coming months, the Network will strive to effectively deliver the four current contracts, continue to meet and work with AWM, the Countryside Agency, RAWM and ACRE. Thanks to Malcolm Kimber, Network Policy Adviser, we continue active representation at the Regional Rural Affairs Forum, where we have been commissioned to enhance VCS engagement.

The Network continues with its seat at the Regional Assembly and Market Town's Initiative Group and furthermore, will be looking to establish other priority groups where Network representation should exist.

Board members will be proactively involved with reviewing and updating the Networks Terms of Reference, protocols for partnership working costing structure on 17 May 04 and business plan for 2004-2007 at a meeting arranged for 10 June 2004.

Business Planning Event
Thursday 10 June 2004
 Shropshire Education & conference Centre

Staff Networking Day

A hugely successful day, with over 30 staff from across the region coming together to look at different ways staff can network on particular topic areas including: housing, market towns, learning and skills, including disadvantaged people and corporate issues. I am pleased to say that several groups have continued to work together. It



was an extremely valuable day to find out who is doing similar work to you in other counties, how they deal with particular issues and finding that a regional approach may be more beneficial.

The flip chart notes can be downloaded in the staff room.

A further event to continue this 'West Midlands' approach to rural needs will be held again later in the year.

ACU Early Spend bid—what does it mean for you?

The Early Spend programme aims to invest in infrastructure organisations which operate at district, county, sub regional or regional levels - whose function is to develop, support, advise and/or train frontline community and voluntary organisations.

The Network project aims to provide a consistent rural voice for the region by conducting a feasibility study that:

- * addresses the potential for extending or 'joining up' ICT capabilities across the RCC's in the West Midlands to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery to the rural VCS
- * identifies how the Network can maximise the

impact of its website and on line tools for its staff and VCS members

- * investigates the ICT opportunities for gathering and representing rural needs of the VCS across the region

- * researches the possibilities for existing local and regional Networks to share and access our common data so that they are better informed of the rural VCS, its services and support needs

Now in the contracting stages, the Network will be looking to appoint a consultant for a number of hours during May - June 04 to produce a feasibility study that explores opportunities for 'providing a consistent rural voice in the region' through ICT. The successful applicant will be expected to gather

this information by facilitating focus groups involving staff from across the region and spending time at each RCC. There will be two focus groups:

- 1) discussing ICT structures and developments
- 2) discussing most effective ways to consult with the VCS and how ICT is used

All staff invited will receive a briefing sheet soon.

A final written report will be produced providing the framework for future developments and funding bids.

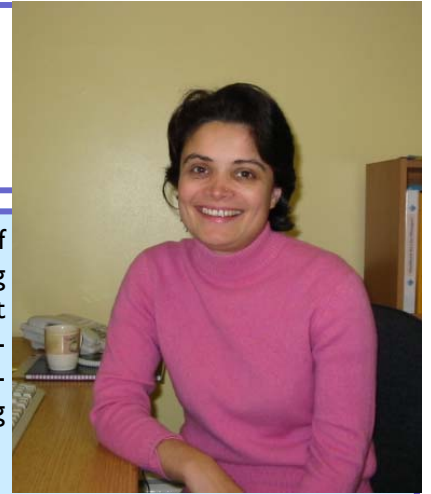
Visit [website](#); [staffroom](#), [library](#) for copy of full bid

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Hasnah currently has responsibility for ensuring the development and delivery of organisational development support services to the voluntary sector by working with a team of eight across Herefordshire and Worcestershire. These support services include training and one to one advice sessions on topics from fundraising to quality assurance. She takes a lead role for briefing the sector on organisational quality assurance systems available and delivers training on implementing PQASSO.

Engaging Worcestershire is a steering group including infrastructure agencies who have a remit to support better representation of the voluntary and community sector. Current members include: Age Concern, Racial Equality Council, LDA's, Government Office, RAWM and Worcestershire County Council. In addition to Hasnah acting as the secretariat, she also plays a continual role in raising the profile and engaging the sector in county and district local strategic partnerships (LSP's).

In response to a national pilot funded through the Home Office, Hasnah takes the lead responsibility for delivering a local project piloting the use of trustee networks in providing governance support to organisations.

Previously, Hasnah spent 2 years with the Community Fund as Regional Development Officer during the lead up to the development of West Midlands regional office. She has over 15 years experience in the sector, both paid and unpaid, home and abroad. Her experiences include acting as vice chair for a Women's Refuge and spending some time in Bangladesh working on a Community Development Project. Here, she was responsible for compiling monitoring reports for funders on behalf of Christian Aid and Oxfam.

Hasnah has a degree in Development Studies, spends as much time as possible outdoors, enjoys gardening and walking and is often found doing a spot of Salsa! Now living in the rural area of Pershore, she finds life very different from her time in Coventry.

DEFRA Support Programme—what is it?

GOWM have commissioned the West Midlands RCC Network to support the development of the five 'county wide' development plans for the Infrastructure Review Main Programme (DEFRA). The Network will be looking to contract with a consultant to deliver this work from 1 May – 30 Jun 04.

The scope of the work will specifically include:

- * support and advice to individual consortia on their development plans
- * provide opportunities for shared experience and problem solving, circulation of reports, communication between consortia
- * help consortia develop short term action plans to

June, including key milestones, responsibilities, outline costs

- * monitor progress against timescale in action plan
- * report to GOWM Steering Group at mid-May on progress
- * arrange and facilitate presentations by all five submissions in early June
- * present a report to GOWM Steering Group on the process and make recommendations to the Group on future development and support needs and associated resources required

This is a significant step for the Network as key regional partners begin to recognise the role RCC's can collectively play in shaping rural strategy and supporting communities.