

Network Update

Edition 4
October 2004



Staff Briefing

'Changing face of rural communities'

Well, we say this every time and every time we mean it. What another crazy 6 months it has been. The more meetings we have, the more contact we maintain with partners, the more strategy that is written and the more work we deliver reminds us that the Network has a real part to play at regional level.

I'm Andy Holden, by the way, Chief Executive of the Community Council of Staffordshire. I have a team of 19 staff working on activities such as supporting village halls, market towns, communities and a dedicated team for a Playaway project.

The great work and commitment from staff in each RCC staff is generating the knowledge and intellect for the Network to give a West Midlands voice and raise rural issues at a regional level. With the introduction of the DEFRA Rural Strategy, things are about to change in terms of rural delivery and funding arrangements. The Network is in an exciting position to see this unfold and be actively involved with influencing the future role of RCC's.



What can I say in such a short space? This edition will give you an insight to the new regional forums we have joined, the regular communication we have, the projects we are delivering, new additions to the website, future priorities and the staff who are working together across the region—so read on!

Money, Money, Money.....

.....that's all they fink about. Well, they are the finance managers!

Finance managers from each of the RCC's have been meeting regularly over the past few months tasked with establishing a Network costing structure based on the principles of the ACEVO model. Not only is this an opportunity for the Network to establish its own financial arrangements but provides an excellent chance for

finance staff to share experiences, learn from one another and develop their shared understanding of the ACEVO model.

The Network has been able to allocate some funds to support this work.

If they can do it—so can you. Find out about staff in the other RCC's.

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Facts:

* April—Nov 2004
£33,000 to provide support to Local consortia

* Delivering year 2 of RSEF with £60,611

* Tendering for ICT strategy development
£2,750



Rural Strategy—the implications for us

On 21st July 2004, Margaret Beckett, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced the Government's new Rural Strategy 2004. It builds on the review of rural delivery, commissioned by DEFRA and published by Lord Haskins last November.

The strategy has been hailed by the Government as a 'new and radical agenda for rural England'. It is constructed around the overall policies and principles relating to three main strategic elements:

- Economic and Social Regeneration
- Social Justice for All
- Enhancing the value of the Countryside Agency

The Strategy is not just a response to the Haskins Report but a new approach to rural policy and delivery that takes into account what has happened and the work that has been done since the publication of the Rural White Paper in 2000. In her statement to the House of Commons Margaret Beckett highlighted a focus on deprivation, on devolution of decisions and delivery and, to ensure that people are able to access help, to "*ruthlessly streamline the funding support we provide*". She went on to say that

"the present 100 rural, agricultural and environmental funding schemes will be reduced to 3 major funding programmes linked to strategic priorities, allowing us both to sweep away unnecessary rules and to simplify application processes."

Defra wishes to devolve delivery even closer to rural communities and Government Regional Offices will take the lead on investigating the scope for innovative joint ventures and ways of working at sub-regional and local level.

Defra aims to improve mainstreaming of the Government's response to rural socio-economic needs and

better targeting of deprivation in lagging rural areas. £21 million previously disbursed by the Countryside Agency will be devolved to the Regional Development Agencies' "Single Pot". From January 2007 RDA's will take over control of European Union social and economic schemes.

Defra proposes that Government Regional Offices should broker appropriate arrangements at a regional level to ensure that decisions are made in a joined-up manner. Regional Rural Affairs Forums will provide a strong voice into the regional decision making process from the customer perspective.

Voluntary and community sector programmes currently run through the Countryside Agency will be run through Government Offices to better join them up with other VCS programmes.

The Countryside Agency will be refocused as a New Countryside Agency providing expert advice to government and advocacy on behalf of rural people. It will not be distracted by delivery functions.

A new Integrated Agency taking on the work of English Nature, the Rural Development Service and much of the work of the Countryside Agency will be established.

Much of the detail of how the rural strategy will be delivered is yet to be finalised but it will be soon.

Each RCC will be running a consultation event for voluntary and community groups to have their say on the Rural Strategy. Malcolm Kimber, Network Policy Adviser has produced a briefing paper for delegates, will speak at each event and pull together the West Midlands VCS views to produce a final policy paper. This will then be presented and discussed with regional partners to influence the delivery of the strategy.

Download the briefing paper www.wmrccn.org.uk from the staff room library under strategic documents.

New additions to www.wmrccn.org.uk

The website has new items pretty much everyday so save the page to your favourites! Loads more documents and news items have been added and the calendar (although will change soon) details all our forthcoming activities. The staff directory now holds details of most staff across the region and the library contains all Network paperwork and strategic documents. Everything you need to know about the Rural Strategy can be found in the staff room. The most recent addition is details about the regional housing agenda

Rural Citizens Panel

You will remember our bid to Carnegie was unsuccessful but the desire to establish a Rural Citizens Panel still remains and Government Office are currently considering available resources. The panel will provide an additional opportunity for gaining feedback and consultation with local rural communities, linking closely with the on line consultation features of the website.

Network sponsorship

Over the past few weeks, several staff members have approached the Network to raise awareness of their work, address the implications for regional strategy and request support for local activity:

- The Community Development Workers from each RCC have been working together regionally for some time. They wrote a formal proposal to the Network asking for support for a regional event they wished to deliver, celebrating their work. The Network was able to dedicate £2000, provide the Network identity for promoting regional attendance and offer practical advice with structure.

The proposal also led to the opportunity for the CDW's to produce a toolkit of good practice for 'including disadvantaged people'. Not only will this guide be extremely useful but £1600 is available for its development.

- Alan Saunders wanted to draw the Networks attention to the importance of the housing agenda at present and for us to better understand what role we can collectively play to influence 'affordable housing'. This resulted in a meeting with the Network, information put on the website, formal links with the housing networks and on going support for RHE at regional meetings.

If you would like to raise an opportunity or issue that has relevance to regional strategy and planning, please let me know. You may also benefit from making contact!

Here, there and everywhere

In order for the Network to voice the needs of rural communities, they must have the right relationships. This strategic networking takes a lot of time, expertise and commitment, however, the Network is beginning to be recognised as an important partner.

We continue representation on:

- West Midlands Regional Assembly
- Rural Affairs Forum and Transport sub group
- Market Towns Initiative Group
- Rural Housing Network

More recently we have been selected or invited to join:

- ChangeUp Strategy Group
- NCVO Regionalisation Sounding Board

In response to our growing reputation, the Network was requested by GOWM to be the lead for the development of the 'Social Justice For All' plank of the Rural Framework along with AWM leading on the Economic. This framework will have influence over the future allocation of rural funding and programmes.

More details about representation will soon be on the website.

RSEF 2 update

Regional Strategic Engagement Fund (RSEF) is our main source of funding (administered by RAWM for AWM) and enables the Network to employ me as the co-ordinator for 2 days per week, produce policy papers, attend regional meetings, arrange local consultation events, develop the website and enable staff from RCCs to get together.

The priorities and activities this year are:

- Produce four policy papers to include; Rural Strategy, Learning and Skills, Housing update, Market Towns and 'including disadvantaged people'
- Each RCC host a local event enabling the voluntary and community sector to learn more about the Rural Strategy 2004 and have the opportunity to influence it
- Deliver a regional event showcasing the achievements of the Network specifically for regional partners and funders

Many policy papers are already available on the website or I can provide you with a full information pack containing all the work of the Network.

Sharing our ICT

In April 2004, the Network secured funds through the ACU Early Spend pot to conduct a feasibility study addressing the opportunities for extending and joining up ICT across the Network to provide better services for rural communities. The study has been completed and is available in full on the website. There were main opportunities and recommendations but inevitably all come at a cost.

The researchers highlighted an urgent need for each RCC to have an ICT strategy that feeds into a Network strategy before any further developments can occur. To ensure this work moves ahead, the Network has identified £2750 to appoint a consultant (from within the Network) to support each RCC develop their own strategy following a standard framework. The consultant will then support the Network to adopt a regional strategy that enhances the work locally. A small amount of funding has been identified for each RCC to participate and nominate a lead person.

GOWM extend our contract

In April 2004, government office commissioned the Network to support the local infrastructure organisations work together to develop a local investment plan, the aim being to collectively improve the services available to the voluntary and community sector.

To achieve this work the Network appointed a consultant (the opportunity was advertised internally) who has been working closely with government office to better understand their requirements and assisting the local consortia to respond.

In August, GOWM re-contracted with us to extend the support available for a further 3 months, whilst the consortia provided the final data required before funds could be released. The consultant has now been working with the Network for 6 months and grasped good understanding of local work.

This work has enabled consistency in approach, dedicated support and regular communication with government representatives.

Recently, the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum commissioned the Network to undertake some research identifying how the forum could better engage the voluntary and community sector, Malcolm Kimber led on the work and his **final report can be downloaded www.wmrccn.org.uk**. The main findings of the report indicated that there is a clear need to improve engagement between WMRAF and VCS. This is supported by the findings of the survey of WMRAF members and by the results of the survey of VCS organisations which show a very limited knowledge of WMRAF with regard to its existence, purpose and activities. Interestingly WMRAF members appeared to rate the standing of Forum members collectively as lower than their personal position. This may well reflect the very limited extent to which members refer to VCS and a hesitation to speak when they feel they lack expertise.

This need is accentuated by the intention of "Rural Strategy 2004" that Rural Affairs Forums should have a strengthened and more important function and that each region needs to have a mechanism to ensure that the rural customer has a clear voice into the regional prioritisation process. **The West Midlands Rural Community Council's Network** offers the potential to be a more significant conduit for increasing engagement between WMRAF and VCS. In particular:

- the Network, although relatively new, has built on pre-existing co-operation between the RCCs in the region and has demonstrated that it can function effectively
- The Network published and distributed the briefing paper on WMRAF
- It can draw on the expertise and experience of the four RCCs which are all well-established bodies with extensive experience in working with rural communities and voluntary organisations.
- The Network is developing a business plan for the next three years through which it seeks to develop its activity including having a greater engaging and influencing role.
- The four RCCs all have substantial involvement with the Infrastructure Programme consortia and generally well established links with other VCS organisations in their areas.
- The Network has its own website which has been developing successfully
- The Network has recently completed an ICT Feasibility Study and is now considering how this may be imple-

Priorities for the next 3 years

The Network is in the final stages of agreeing the business plan for 2005-2008. When agreed by Network members, the business plan will be sent to individual Board meetings for endorsement and then made publicly available on the website. Activities for the next three years focus on:

- Consolidation and development
- Engaging and Influencing
- Delivering and Achieving

Estimated running costs are approximately £160,000 per year, which does not include any direct project work. It looks to be a busy few years and we ask that staff take the opportunity to view the business plan when put on the website and feed any views to the co-ordinator. This is not a static document—it will develop over the period and activities will include consultation and involvement of RCC staff. It is going to be an exciting time as RCC's begin to look at how they can work

Contacts for the RCC's

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www.staffs.org.uk

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