



West Midlands Rural Community Council Network:

West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum

Origins

The Rural White Paper of November 2000 included a commitment to establish a National Rural Sounding Board (13.4.1) and a series of Regional Rural Sounding Boards (13.4.3). These two paragraphs stated respectively:

“It is important that Ministers should be fully informed of the state of the countryside and should have regular and direct contact with the main rural groups so that they know what is going on and what countryside people think”

“We will establish Regional Rural Sounding Boards bringing together rural stakeholders within regions to inform and monitor the regional and local delivery of policy in rural areas. These will build on existing Rural Forum arrangements in each region, taking account of further developments in community involvement.”

The Rural White Paper also contained a proposal to create the role of Rural Advocate “to argue the case on countryside issues and for rural people at the highest levels in government and outside.” The advocate role was to be undertaken by the Chair of the Countryside Agency who would be a member of the National Rural Sounding Board.

These proposals have been brought to fruition but with a change of name from Rural Sounding Board to Rural Affairs Forum at both national and regional levels.

In the West Midlands the “existing Rural Forum” was the Rural Network which had its origins in the mid 1990s and latterly had a secretariat provided by the Countryside Agency. Its aims were to:

- Provide an information service for members on rural issues
- Interpret and disseminate good practice and survey information
- Provide a meeting place and forum for its members where issues can be discussed and interaction forged
- Stimulate and initiate new partnerships joining the rural and urban West Midlands together

The Rural Network had a “Core Group” of members which met regularly and a wider group which came together once or twice a year for conferences. The advent of the Regional Rural Affairs Forum would have led to duplication and the “Core Group” became the basis on which the new Forum was built.

Think Rural - our continuing message to Government at all levels when policies are being formulated and changed

Rural Strategic Engagement Fund 2

The Network has secured £171,002 through the Regional Strategic Engagement Fund (RSEF) to assist the partnership of rural community councils develop their engagement in regional policy and strategy development over the next 3 years.

The fund, made possible by grants of £2.072 million from AWM and other partners, is managed by RAWM with an aim to ‘provide capacity building support to regionally significant communities/communities of interest to enable them to engage in regional policy and strategy development’.

Under the rural theme, the Network will now be in a better position to reflect the needs and views of local rural communities to those who are making decisions about strategic planning. The objectives of the Network are to increase the opportunity for consulting and listening to rural needs, develop tools for gathering issues raised locally and representing a regional picture whilst assisting local communities understand the regional agenda and feel able to influence it.

This paper is one of a series of policy papers produced by the West Midlands RCC Network covering a range of topics. For a list see reverse, for hard copies contact the Network Co-ordinator, 01684 580862 or visit www.wmrccn.org.uk to download.

Why was the Regional Rural Affairs Forum set up?

The short answer is that Government policy set out in the Rural White Paper required it to be done. It does, however, reflect a heightened awareness in Government of the significance of rural issues and the need to involve "stakeholders" in policy development.

What are its aims and objectives?

The following Method of Working is set out on the Regional Rural Affairs Forum website.

The main purpose of the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum is to bring together rural stakeholders within the Region to inform and monitor the delivery of policy in rural areas. The Forum will:

Work with:

rural people and businesses to identify concerns and understand the dynamics of rural communities;

Government Office and the Countryside Agency on Rural Proofing issues which are important to the region;

Advise:

the Regional Assembly on integrating rural issues within the activities of the Assembly;

Review:

service delivery in rural areas;

progress on the implementation of the Rural White Paper;

key rural policies and programmes to ensure 'regional fit';

Monitor:

the work of the Regional Observatory to ensure relevance and consistency in the collection, presentation and testing of data;

Share:

best practice and information to assist policy and strategy development and decision making;

Provide:

direction, leadership and co-ordination in respect of the rural agenda;

a conduit for rural views and the West Midlands perspective on proposals affecting rural areas;

Promote:

the work of the Forum in a spirit of openness and transparency through the Learning Network and the wider West Midlands Rural Network;

the West Midlands rural agenda among appropriate national, regional, and local bodies and institutions.

In fulfilling this role and remit the Rural Affairs Forum will draw on work being done by other regional organisations, that may or may not be part of the membership structure of the Forum, and will review work done by others, for example:

The Countryside Agency's regional 'State of the Countryside' report;

The annual report produced by GOWM;

Annual, rural and other reports from a range of other regional organisations



Malcolm Kimber (West Midlands RCC Network Representative and Chairman of Transport Task Group) with the A49 Link minibus service at Craven Arms)

But what does this really mean?

This may all sound complicated and involved so what is a summary of the essential elements?

The Forum looks at issues that concern rural communities and businesses and it takes these up with organisations within the region or at national level via the England Forum.

The Forum comments on proposals (regional or national) which affect rural areas.

The Forum reviews progress with the Rural White Paper and other key rural policies and expresses its views on what changes are needed.

The Forum reviews service delivery to rural areas and looks at how this may be improved

The Forum acts as a vehicle for sharing information and views.

So how does it work?

The Forum itself holds four meetings a year but its work is carried forward in other ways particularly through a series of task groups and the learning network on the website. From time to time ad hoc meetings of groups of members are called to address specific issues.

Who are the members?

The membership is based on the following broad sectors

1. Countryside, Environment and Recreation
2. Rural Economy and Employment
3. Rural Communities and Services
4. Central Government Bodies
5. Regional and sub-regional Forums
6. Local Government

The actual membership is based on the members of the Rural Network Core Group as was the intention of the Rural White Paper. The Core Group identified gaps in the existing representation and also responded to requests for seats from a number of organisations. The Forum reviews its membership annually. There are currently 37 members, a full list is in Appendix 1. Some organisations have appointed alternative members and these are also listed.

What about the task groups?

Task groups have been set up to deal with issues which the Forum considers to be of high priority or to respond to important policy consultations. Membership of the groups is not restricted to Forum members but rather people with relevant knowledge and expertise are drawn in. The intention is generally that task groups are time limited in their operations rather than standing committees.

Groups have been formed to deal with

- Review of Agri-environment schemes
- Health and Nutrition and a Local Food Strategy
- Cross Border Issues (with Wales)
- Transport
- Rural Proofing and Rural Services
- Regional Planning Guidance
- Mid-term Review of the Common Agricultural Policy

What has the Forum actually done?

The Regional Forum was not given an operational budget although secretariat services are provided by the Government Office and the Countryside Agency.



Forum in session - observers at back

Subsequently a small budget was made available by the Regional Assembly to ensure that the Forum was accessible to all sectors especially Voluntary and Community members who may not be able to claim expenses from their organisation. Defra has also provided a small budget to promote the work of the Forum. The Forum's major role relates to policy and thus its main activities are about informing and influencing rather than direct on the ground action.

The Forum first met on 18 March 2002 and to the time of preparation of this briefing has held eight meetings. Presentations are a regular feature of the agenda and where feasible are used as an opportunity for the Forum to express its views on policy proposals. Subjects covered have included

- The Curry Report "Farming and Food – a Sustainable Future" and the Regional Delivery Plan of the Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food.
- The English Regions White Paper - "Your Region, Your Choice"
- Tourism in the region
- The Rural Skills Action Plan
- Rural Transport issues
- The Regional Observatory
- Haskins Rural Delivery Review
- The role of the Regional Assembly
- Regional Economic Strategy and the accompanying statement on Rural Renaissance
- The Voluntary and Community Sector
- The Rural Stress Information Network

In addition to providing comment through the meetings Forum members have worked in ad hoc groups to stress the importance of the rural dimension to the European Regional Development Programme Regional Consultation Group, in the West Midlands European Strategic Framework, in the Regional Housing Strategy and in the Mid-term evaluation of European Objective 2.

In looking back over the operation of the Forum Tony Harris the Chairman commented that "In our first two years we have actively informed policy on rural issues at national and regional levels. As we enter our third year our role to advise on policy and monitor delivery will be enhanced as a result of the Haskins recommendations and Defra's Modernising Rural Delivery programme. To ensure we remain effective as the region's rural voice in this enhanced role, engagement at the 'grass roots' will be vital!"

Task Group Actions

Rural Transport

The group met first in May 2003 and has had its main focus on



Nick Read (Forum representative on England Forum). Audrey Wright (Forum Secretary) and Tony Harris (Forum Chairman)

- establishing closer links with the Regional Transport Partnership in order to get rural issues on its agenda
- seeking (with success) changes to the Regional Transport Priorities to reflect rural issues
- establishing better base line information on rural transport services and accessibility to services in order to better monitor changes

Health & Nutrition and Local Food Strategy

- developed a set of criteria that identify the potential for the local procurement of fruit and vegetables for the National School Fruit Scheme. Pilot scheme under development
- worked to identify and establish regional distribution networks – to enable small companies to be able to compete with large companies
- worked with Localise West Midlands (a network which aims to contribute to rebuilding the regional economy by emphasising local solutions to local and national problems) to set up a conference to encourage and support local suppliers in setting up collaboratives and dealing with complex tendering processes.
- workshop on tendering for the supply of fruit in the West Midlands for the NSFS was held in February 2004, to encourage local companies to tender for this contract when it expires in June 2004
- met with the Sustainable Development Commission and agreed to help them get the messages about the need for sustainability into the NHS

- A research project, to assess the value and potential of local food projects in terms of social and economic development and also their role in strengthening urban/rural links has been let and is funded by AWM

Rural Proofing

The Group decided that it needed to limit its focus and is concentrating on health and youth issues

Health and regeneration event in March 2004 which examined links between health and regeneration in the Rural Regeneration Zone and agreed future objectives.

Identification of seriousness of access to rural services as an issue for young people and future Forum meeting will have a focus on this and how to achieve greater engagement with young people

Work arising out of Regional Planning Guidance work to identify and prioritise the critical rural services for different parts of the region. A Critical Rural Services Study is being drafted.

Cross Border Issues

Group has identified a range of issues of concern for cross border zone including health, broadband and ICT access, community regeneration, transport

A research brief that would quantify the impact of the national border on a range of issues has been developed

Met with Welsh counterparts to explore shared concerns and to identify areas for co-operation.

Regional Planning Guidance

This Group followed up the work of the Rural Network Core Group which made representations at the public inquiry into RPG by responding to the consultation on the inquiry panel report.

Sector	Member	Alternative	Organisation
Chair	Dr.Tony Harris OBE		
Secretariat	Mrs. Audrey Wright Mrs. Fiona Moore		Rural Affairs Team, Government Office for the West Midlands Countryside Agency
Countryside, Environment and Recreation	Nick King Steve Holliday Chris Carter	Barbara Yates Peter Shirley	Environment Agency West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership West Midlands Regional Sustainability Forum
	Dr David Hickie Nigel Russell	Matthew Dobson	English Heritage Visit Heart of England Contact: Sarah Finlay
Rural Economy & Employment	David Collier Mrs. Caroline Bedell Dr.Philip Extnace William Lyons Paddy George Roger Shutt	Andrew Richards Mrs. Frances Beatty Alan Curless Christopher Harvey Richard Savory Mr J Partridge	National Farmers Union Country Land and Business Association Learning and Skills Council - Shropshire Confederation of West Midlands Chambers of Commerce Business Link Transport and General Workers Union
Rural Communities and Services (including Voluntary Sector)	Rev. Nick Read OBE Malcolm Kimber Mrs Janet Baker Mrs. Janet Gee Mrs.Heather Barrett-Mold Mrs. Sharon Palmer Mike Atherton Bruce Undy	The Rev'd Peter Dakin Alison Chappell Alec Kendall Lionel Hill MBE Chris Bonnard	Chaplaincy for Agricultural and Rural Life West Midlands Rural Community Council Network Department of Health, West Midlands Public Health Group National Federation of Young Farmers Association of Colleges Regional Action West Midlands Regional Housing Partnership Regional Transport Strategy Forum
	GOWM Rural Director Brin Davies	David Howatson	Government Office for the West Midlands
Central Government Bodies	Ian Baker Mrs. Fiona Moore Geoff Sansome Dr Peter Knights Bill Heslegrave	Roger Owen Robert Williams Simon West	Advantage West Midlands Countryside Agency RDS, DEFRA English Nature Forestry Commission
	Local Government	Roger Evans Alwyn Davies	West Midland Association of Parish and Town Councils West Midlands Local Government Association
Regional/Sub Regional Forums	Mrs. Jennifer Watkins Paul Shevlin Steve Hopkins Peter Smith Jef Tuyn Mrs. Fiona Moore Gavin Willetts David Littlemore Cllr. Roger Walker	Graham Biggs Jane Kennedy Joanna Righton Steve Trow	Herefordshire Partnership The Shropshire Partnership Team Staffordshire Local Strategic Partnership Worcestershire Partnership Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire Rural Forum West Midlands Rural Network West Midlands Life Regional Assembly Regional Assembly

Acknowledgements:

Tony Harris (Chair) and Audrey Wright (secretary) of the Forum for commenting on the draft
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References:

www.ruralnetworkwm.org.uk

For more information:

Contact Malcolm Kimber who represents the West Midlands RCC network on the forum, mailto: Malcolm.Kimber@collegehill.org.uk

Contact Audrey Wright, secretary to the forum, awright.gowm@go-regions.gsi.gov.uk

The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network draws together the four rural community councils (RCCs) which operate within the region. Each member RCC is an independent charitable organisation with a broad range of member organisations including parish councils, voluntary and community organisations and village halls, and has access through newsletters and mailings to over four thousand groups and individuals throughout the region. The RCCs have the common aims of promoting voluntary action and improving rural life. Across the West Midlands the RCCs have a combined turnover of over £3.75 million and employ over one hundred full time equivalent staff providing technical and professional support on issues and projects to people in local communities.

RCCs

have a considerable understanding of rural issues born out of a long involvement with rural communities. They provide a forum for voluntary and community organisations and a wide range of information and advisory services. They enjoy membership of many partnerships that encourage community development and capacity building in rural areas and that manage projects delivering benefits to rural communities. Part of the RCCs' effectiveness stems from the close relationships they have with networks including village hall committees, playing fields trusts and parish councils. Recently they have also developed relationships with regional structures, most notably through the West Midlands Regional Rural Affairs Forum, the West Midlands Rural Network, RAWM (Regional Action West Midlands - the voluntary and community sector network) and the West Midlands European Network.



West Midlands RCC Network Contacts:

Community Council of Shropshire

1 College Hill,
Shrewsbury, SY1 1LT
Tel 01743 360641
Fax 01743 233335
ccs@shropshire-rcc.org.uk
www.shropshire-rcc.org.uk



Community Council of Staffordshire

Friars Mill,
Friars Terrace,
Stafford, ST17 4DX
Tel 01785 242525
Fax 01785 242176
info@staffs.org.uk



Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire

141 Church Street,
Malvern, WR14 2AN
Tel 01684 573334
Fax 01684 573388
info@communityhw.org.uk
www.communityhw.org.uk



(These contact details also apply for Michelle O'Neill, West Midlands RCC Network Co-ordinator.
[Email: michelleo@communityhw.org.uk](mailto:michelleo@communityhw.org.uk))

Warwickshire Rural Community Council

25 Stoneleigh, Deer Park
Stareton,
Kenilworth, CV8 2LY
Tel 02476 531280
Fax 02476 531296
www.ruralwarwickshire.org.uk



Authors:

Regional Rural Affairs Forum, Malcolm Kimber, Community Council of Shropshire
Changing face of support for rural communities, Alison Chappell, Warwickshire Rural Community Council
Village Halls across the West Midlands, Tim Scott, Community Council of Staffordshire

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Papers available:

Rural Housing
Rural Transport
Voluntary Sector Infrastructure
West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum
Village Halls in the West Midlands
The changing face of support for Rural Communities

Supported by:

