



'Investing in Rural Intelligence – Our Future'

West Midlands Rural Community Council Network

Governance Review

2006

SUMMARY VERSION

Submitted to WMRCCN by Arte- Research

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. This is a summary of a report to address governance arrangements for the West Midlands Rural Community Council Network. The full report is available on request from the WMRCCN Co-ordinator, c/o Community First, 141 Church Street, Malvern, Worcs. WR14 3AN. Tel 01684 573334.
- 1.2. The Network commissioned Arte Research to assist it to conduct a formal review of its governance arrangements. The aim of the assignment was to help members identify appropriate structures to ensure the Network was 'fit for purpose' in the future and capable of supporting both its growing presence at a regional level and its remit for service delivery.
- 1.3. When reviewing governance arrangements, it is important to remember that 'structure should follow purpose', and 'form should follow function'. The Network needed to be very clear-eyed about its priorities and how things might change its operating environment. The following principles could then be applied:
 - Governance arrangements should be proportional to the group's responsibilities and risks (both financial and by reputation).
 - Governance arrangements do not limit risk on their own but need to be underpinned by effective operational protocols.
 - Arrangements should be commensurate with the resources available to secure them.
- 1.4. The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network was formally launched in May 2003 but had begun work in 2002. It is made up of the four Rural Community Councils in the West Midlands region. These are the Community Council of Shropshire, the Community Council of Staffordshire, Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire and Warwickshire Rural Community Council. Collectively they have a combined turnover of £3,750,000 and employ the equivalent of over 100 full staff, providing technical and professional support to people in rural communities, on issues and in projects including:
 - Village halls and community buildings
 - Parish and town councils
 - Community transport schemes
 - Training for voluntary and community organisations
 - Funding and charities advice
 - Community needs appraisals
 - Community enterprise
 - Social housing
 - Community care
- 1.5. Each member Rural Community Council is an independent charitable organisation with a broad range of member organisations including Parish Councils, voluntary and community organisations and village halls. They have access through newsletters and mailings to over four thousand groups and individuals throughout the region.

- 1.6. The Network was developed in response to the government trend towards regionalisation. It has aimed to ensure that rural needs and issues are represented to regional bodies and agencies in an informed and co-ordinated way. In addition to furthering joint working between the four Rural Community Councils, the Network works closely with other local and regional partners.
- 1.7. The purposes of the Network include to:
- Assist Rural Community Councils in combating disadvantage and enhancing service delivery to local communities.
 - Reflect the interests of rural communities to regional partners.
 - Facilitate the engagement of local communities in the regional strategic agenda.
 - Share expertise and good practice amongst the four Rural Community Councils.
 - Build capacity of the four Rural Community Councils to deliver services with equity across the region.
- 1.8. The Network was set up as an informal, non-constituted body. A Network co-ordinator was sought from within the Rural Community Councils in 2002 and seconded from Community First for two days per week. The Network has delivered a variety of projects on behalf of regional partners, including Advantage West Midlands and Government Office. It has established sound working relationships with key regional stakeholders and regular communication is in place.
- 1.9. The Network has encouraged staff collaboration and liaison across the Network, with varying degrees of success. The strategies used include staff away days, working groups, a staff room on the website and a staff newsletter.

The Network sits on, or has had a place on, several regional strategic groupings including the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum and its Transport Sub-group, the West Midlands Regional Assembly, the Market Towns Initiative Group, the Regional Housing Strategic Partnership and the Board of ACRE. It is well known in the region and has built up a good track record in responding to regional rural issues.

“Whatever developments there are, it is important for the WMRCCN to be maintained. As far as the Shire counties are concerned, the network is the only regional structure that speaks with one voice on rural issues.”

Interviewee

2. Methodology

- 2.1. The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network commissioned Arte Research to facilitate a debate with key members of the Network's Steering Group to identify governance issues associated with the long term future vision for the Network. The Network made key documents relating to its development and operation available for review.
- 2.2. Primacy was given stimulating a lively debate among Network members and the views of the Network members were considered to be of great importance. However, it was also important to identify the expectations of external stakeholders, agencies with an interest in rural affairs and the voluntary and community sector. West Midlands Rural Community Council Network works in crowded sub-regional and regional environments, and the thinking and expectations of its partners would clearly influence its consideration of its future and so its future governance arrangements.
- 2.3. To examine the factors integral to considering governance arrangements, the following tasks were undertaken:
 - A review of West Midlands Rural Community Council Network documents, evaluations and plans.
 - An exploration of the governance arrangements adopted by other regional Rural Community Council Networks (and other regional voluntary and community sector fora).
 - In order to understand the differing needs and expectations interviews were undertaken with key stakeholders from within the West Midlands Rural Community Council Network including the Rural Community Council Chief Executives and the Network's Policy and Research Officer.
 - In order to understand the expectations of external partner agencies, telephone and face to face interviews were undertaken.
 - Accompanying the above, a review of legal options available to the Network was also undertaken. The aim was to investigate and analyse appropriate governance structures and models that might be appropriate to this partnership and its mission.
 - Discussion of the draft report and recommendations.
 - Final Report incorporating final recommendations.
 - Dissemination Event.

3. Summary of Recommendations

- 3.1. Experience to date shows that whilst idea of a regional rural network appears fine in theory, in practice it is less so, as organisational difference, geographical spread (distance means time as well as travel costs) mean rural groupings require a higher level of internal and external commitment than other regional networks. However the Network can have a virtual existence larger than its actual meeting calendar, and it can continue to exercise strategic influence through its core group.
- 3.2. The environment in which the Network operates offers no significant reason for the Network to divest itself of any of its functions. Furthermore with no resources immediately obvious for regional strategic engagement, it would be unrealistic, indeed counterproductive for the one rural voluntary and community sector Network that is in place, to have its wings clipped, or to be restricted by others from playing as full a role as it can on behalf of the voluntary and community sector at the regional table.
- 3.3. We therefore make the following recommendations:

Service Delivery

1. Continue to focus on strengthening internal capacity, and the capacity building of both individual Rural Community Councils and the Network itself.
2. Maintain an appropriate service delivery agenda, but make greater use of procedures and protocols to ensure early identification of potential duplication, and risk and to instigate good decision making and risk management procedures.
3. Strengthen risk management procedures and develop risk management mechanisms especially that are more pro-active. Do this through developing and making better use of existing (2001) operational and financial protocols to address:
 - Allocating and delegating work (authority levels)
 - Project planning cycle (risk identification and minimum reporting requirements)
 - Reporting systems to trigger notice of under-performance especially financial reporting;
 - Training and support for Network members with less capacity to engage; or where members face different or more difficult local operating environments;
 - Setting and measuring results, and regularly reviewing Network performance
 - Dealing with failure, complaints and conflict
4. Strengthen staff engagement and commitment; clarify management relationships for Network staff.

Strategic Position

- Clarify the Network's claim to a strategic position, as an expert voice, well linked to the rural grass roots, and able to facilitate meaningful consultation; promote this with external agencies and structures; ensure no member 'over claims'.
- Build on the good opinion of regional partners such as GOWM, AWM, RAF and the Regional Assembly.
- Promote the strategic claim vigorously (expert witness on rural issues based on organisational experience, membership, continuous project work at grass roots and relationships with other thematic and infrastructure voluntary and community sector networks (housing,, health, faith etc).
- Ensure Network members are clear about their authority level when attending external for or acting as accountable bodies for Network business.

External Relationships

- Strengthen formal and informal links with Shire Infrastructure Consortia, particularly in activity relating to research and consultation.
- Help CALC (County Association of Local Councils) link with the Network and with members of county level voluntary and community sector infrastructure with a rural interest.
- Negotiate with RAWM concerning the priority they give to rural issues and how best to maintain a voluntary and community sector presence in rural regional policy making.
- Place more emphasis on marketing the Network and consolidating its position at regional level.
- Strengthen research links especially RAWM, RegenWM, RA, Shire infrastructure consortia;
- Include pertinent issues emanating from Shire Change Up infrastructure meetings on the Network's agenda.

Governance Arrangements

- The Network should not assume the role or remit of a representative regional rural voluntary and community sector forum, and it should not expand its current arrangements to try to accommodate this. It should retain the current Network membership, reflecting its 'claim'.
- Retain the current informal partnership arrangements, but review these regularly as changes in capacity, remit or strategic position may lead to need for greater legal protection from liabilities. At present the Network's operating environment is very fluid and widely considered not to be timely for making hard and fast decisions under these circumstances.
- Strengthen the Network's current governance arrangements, especially by involving trustees with the Network Chair and involving trustees in policy matters.

- Clarify roles and responsibilities within the Network, especially the authority of the accountable Rural Community Council, or the Network Chair, to intervene when a project delivered by another Rural Community Council looks likely to fail.
- Redefine the role of the Network Chair, for example incorporating responsibility for managing the Network's overall collaboration, for responding to the Networks' early warning systems, and implementing new Network policies, procedures and protocols.
- Monitor that regular reports from the Network go to the boards of individual Rural Community Councils, and secure more involvement from Trustees (the Business Plan 2004 suggests Quarterly Reporting by 2005).

Operational Strategy

- Work towards securing greater engagement and commitment from the staff in each Rural Community Council, but be realistic about practicalities, given their geographic spread, their distance from the regional agenda and their focus on local projects.
 - Continue to develop collaborative activity between Network members, especially in back office functions; see Appendix 4 for a model structure.
 - Track and measure the Network's added value, both to external partners, and for the member Rural Community Councils. The former could be measured by addressing strategic presence (the Business Plan 2004 limits measuring to service delivery), and the latter by making explicit and promoting the link between the Network's projects, and the aims and objectives of individual Rural Community Councils. Introduce some SMART targets as well as softer success criteria.
 - Seek resources to consolidate internal processes, procedures, protocols and management arrangements.
- 3.4. And finally, to review the Network's policy environment in one year's time, to ensure that the new arrangements and strategic positioning remain fit for purpose.