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Dear Sirs

‘Prosperous Places’ – Response to Consultation Paper of 31st March 2008

I am responding to your invitation to comment on your consultation paper, ‘Prosperous Places’, on behalf of the Rural Affairs Forum for Yorkshire and The Humber, for which I act as Chair.

By way of explanation, our Rural Affairs Forum (RAF) is one of eight such forums initiated by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in line with the Rural White Paper, 2004. It exists primarily to represent the views and concerns of the rural ‘customer’, i.e. those on the receiving end of the way policies and service delivery are applied in rural areas. Its membership comprises stakeholders from the private, voluntary and public sector and therefore provides a cross-cutting rather than sectoral voice. My Forum is independent and provides feedback nationally to Ministers and regionally to authorities and organizations and acts as a sounding board for new ideas at both levels. As such we welcome the opportunity to express views on the implementation of the sub-national economic review proposal and our comments below reflect our perspective on the SNR and related proposals by our RDA to handle economic issues through the concept of ‘city regions’.

The RAF is part of our Regional Rural Framework – a partnership agenda and way of working which has been endorsed by the Yorkshire and Humber Assembly. The RAF has links to other partnerships at regional and sub-regional level as well as to various government departments via the Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber. These linkages and the RAF’s role will become more important under the mainstreaming agenda as Defra has devolved more responsibility for this to the regional level rather than undertaking specifically rural interventions itself.

The rural dimension to policy and delivery

I hope it will be self-evident that the dispersed nature of rural communities and the limitations of accessibility via public transport in most rural areas combines to create different circumstances to urban and metropolitan situations when trying to ensure that those living and working in rural areas receive equitable treatment in terms of services and facilities. There is concern that these different circumstances - the rural dimension - tends to be overlooked with a greater focus on the urban dimension where policy and delivery is concerned. This difference is beginning to receive more attention through the government’s promotion of ‘rural proofing’ at regional down to local level. Rural proofing is seen as a means whereby the responsible authorities and

others check that rural areas are properly and effectively covered by mainstream policy and delivery and we welcome the reference to the importance of this on page 73 of the consultation document.

The RAF's relationship and contribution to new SNR regional structures

By way of context 80% of the Yorkshire and The Humber region's land area is rural and is home to 20% of the regional population. The Rural Affairs Forum (RAF) seeks to inform and assist partners in the rural proofing and mainstreaming activity described above. The RAF membership encompasses a considerable reservoir of experience and knowledge of policy and practice across the very diverse rural parts of the region ranging from those close to the conurbations to the very sparsely populated moors, from market towns to smaller villages and from the dales to the coastal strip. We believe this expertise should not be lost to the new SNR governance structures as we feel it can add major added value not only to strategy development but also to rural delivery by LSP/LAA/MAA structures. We can offer these structures support as an effective means of exchanging ideas and information via the networks represented by RAF members.

Summary of Y&HRAF response

Our response to the questions posed in the consultation paper can be summarized as follows:

1. Specific recognition of the rural dimension in decision-making by the proposed new SNR structures both at regional and sub-regional level. (LSP/LAA)
2. Specific appointments with rural responsibilities within the two key partners – the RDA and the local authorities – that will form the regional Board.
3. The Y&HRAF to be included within SNR structures.
4. The new integrated regional strategies should make specific reference to how rural and urban roles interact, and provide a clear basis for monitoring the rural impact of policy and delivery at regional and sub-regional level.

Consultation Questions

Our response to those specific questions posed in the consultation paper of particular interest to us are set out below.

Question 3

To ensure that rural issues are embedded into regional culture, we recommend that the RDA Board is strengthened with a member with specific rural knowledge and experience. These should not just be economic but cover the social and environmental aspects of sustainability.

The RAF should be included in the thematic Board structures which we understand the Joint Regional response by Yorkshire Forward (YF) and Local Government Yorkshire and the Humber (LGYH) has proposed. This will maintain existing connections and the link with Defra and Lord Haskins' review into modernizing rural delivery in the new SNR structures. It should be a direct involvement and not be subsidiary to other single issue groups as RAF membership covers many rural interests - economic/social and environmental - and therefore represents a overall rural view in one place of reference.

Question 4

We wish to make three points:

1. We believe the regional strategy (para 4.13) should set out the rural implications of sustainable economic growth over the plan period and how this impacts on other public goals of a social and environmental nature. The economic connections between urban (city) and rural areas are important, with major benefit and added value contributing both ways to the total regional economy. The clusters of economic activity and financial services in the cities has a far more significant relationship with the rural hinterland than the latter simply providing a dormitory function. This is illustrated in policies for health and recreation and, more so in future, a significant contribution to managing climate change and carbon budgeting. These interactivities need formal recognition and should be a required part of regional strategies.
2. The new regional strategy should provide a clear basis for monitoring delivery from regional down to local level. We regard it as crucial in demonstrating equitable delivery to all across the region and that rural is effectively 'mainstreamed' that monitoring arrangements provide an effective evidence base.
3. We also believe that rural economic activity and its relationship with that of urban areas, needs formal recognition in the new regional *structures*, particularly as this region moves towards a "city region" concept

We agree the principles outlined in para 4.19.

Questions 5

The new integrated streamlined process summarised on page 35 does not on the face of it appear much different to existing arrangements for similar strategies. Consultations will be speeded by clarity as to what delivery means.

Question 6

We support the production of delivery plans (4.27). It is hard to see how a meaningful strategy could be implemented without them and they should provide a useful check and explanation to all parties of what various aspects of the strategy will mean in practice.

Questions 8 and 12-14

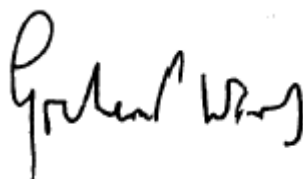
Given the mainstreaming agenda, it is a major concern to us that there should be mechanisms for equitable delivery of services to the rural sector where spatial separation and smaller community clusters are the norm.

We believe that measurement targets should be developed that allow scrutiny at LAA level to enable evidence of equity to be reported to RDA and Government. One cannot expect the major service providers to be able to respond physically for rural customers on the same time scales set out for urban customers but rural customers should have clear targets and standards. This not only enables rural proofing of delivery strategies, it also sets levels of expectation so that reality is created on all sides. The Post Office had specific criteria for their recent closure programme which added clarity to all those involved. Setting appropriate standards for aspects of rural delivery would be a step forward.

We believe this is very much in the territory of the LSP/ LAA part of the SNR review and we would like to see a duty to consult rural structures such as the RAF and its individual members as appropriate, for example the Rural Community Councils, in the performance assessments. We would suggest this rural delivery performance is very much part of the RDA considerations of performance and devolution of powers to sub regional governance.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any elaboration on the above comments.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Graham Ward'.

Graham Ward OBE
YHRAF Chair