



Monday, 23 June 2008

Response to the Sub National Review consultation, SW Rural Affairs Forum

The SW Rural Affairs Forum discussed the consultation document “Prosperous Places: Taking forward the Review of Sub National economic development and Regeneration”.

The Forum wishes to make the following comments.

1. Economic growth cannot be an end in itself, in isolation from the impacts on Society and the environment. In rural areas this is acutely apparent, Today, the electorate is more than ever aware of these impacts, and would wish to see the growth agenda transformed into a truly “sustainable development” agenda. There are good opportunities for this in the context of a Single regional Strategy, and we look forward to the legislation making clear commitment to it.
2. We welcome commitment to the principle of engaging both stakeholders and the public. The commitment however is not reflected in a statement of detail of that engagement. The failure of regional assemblies to attract public support was, we feel, in large part due to the indirect nature of regional responsibility and decision making. We remain to be reassured that the new proposals will respond.
3. We welcome the development of a Single regional Strategy, and would commend the progress that the SW regional Assembly had already made in that regard. However the areas where integration of strategies was proving most challenging – Health, Community Safety and Policing, access to rural services, for example –we believe remain outside the scope of the current proposals. And yet they are integral to the success of the Strategy across the region, and for rural areas in particular. Furthermore we believe that the Single Regional Strategy, while facilitated by the RDAs, should be led by local authorities and their established partners and electorates if there is to be true “buy in”.
4. In the SW, rural areas make up a very large proportion of land area and population. Over 50% of the people live within rural communities. The land area, with over 30% carrying designated status, is integral not only to the rural economy, but also to the quality of life of residents and visitors alike. However within the rural areas there are many small pockets of deprivation, places where access to services, quality employment and training is poor, and housing increasingly unaffordable. We are concerned that a focus on

pure economic growth , focussed where the investment from the RDAs can give “value for money” will mean that there is not clear strategy to address these rural issues, and little capacity remaining with the local authorities.

5. While it is good to know that parliamentarians are eager to understand and scrutinise regional issues, we are not convinced that the proposed scrutiny will give value for money, or ensure good strategic decision making at the outset.
6. We look forward to a more open and accountable RDA, which we believe will be essential if the Agency is to command the confidence of business and residents alike. However, while “Prosperous Places” makes a commitment to requiring the Agencies to operate in a very different manner from the present, we see no detailed standards for public engagement and information. The Assemblies set high standards in this regard for proposals, meeting agendas, minutes and decisions that should be adopted by the RDAs in their functions as Regional Planning Bodies.

Catherine Le Grice-Mack, chair
Steven Parsons, vice chair