



Yorkshire and the Humber Rural Affairs Forum,
Tuesday 7th November 2006, Pavilions of Harrogate

Minutes

For attendance list please see: [RAF 7th November Attendance List](#)

1) Introduction – John Napier, Chair

John welcomed members and introduced the Forum meeting agenda. He set out the new direction of the forum and it's membership and also reported back from the RAF Chairs and Minister's meeting with Defra minister Barry Gardiner on October 17th 2006.

Please see slides: [John Napier's Introduction Presentation](#)

2) Rural Post Office Closures

Presentation 1) Policy Facts and Timescale: [Mike Feist's Presentation](#)

Presentation on the policy facts and timescale regarding Rural Post office subsidy and potential closures given by Mike Feist, Sustainability and Rural Affairs Directorate at GOYH.

Presentation 2) Rural Community View: [Stephen Fox's Presentation](#)

Presentation on the Rural Community View given by Stephen Fox, the regional Rural Community Council policy coordinator.

The main points from Stephen's presentation were:

- **Lose the post office. Lose the shop:** Many village shops depend on the PO to remain viable
- **Access to essential over the counter services:** Purchase of stamps, payment of bills, licences, pensions and benefits, help and advice from someone who has time and cares!
- **Access to cash:** In rural areas around 30% of residents draw cash from the PO. 6,000 bank branch closures since 1990 and a lack of free-to-use rural ATMs.
- **The local economy:** Small rural businesses use the PO and it increases passing trade. Research (CA & CAB) shows closure of a PO in a typical rural settlement is likely in cut economic resources by £52,000+ per annum to the local community.
- **Isolated and vulnerable people:** Research (Postwatch & CRC) shows 64% of rural residents used a PO in the previous week, even more so for the over 65s, disabled, those on low incomes and carers. Travel to another village or town can be problematic if no car.
- **Community identity:** Village PO seen as part of community identity, heritage and pride. This may be difficult to measure but as important as financial value.
- **Issues, solutions, sustainability:** Change to rural the PO network is inevitable but needs to be part of the overall access to services issue. Solutions need to be joined up, costs and benefits need to be measured to include social dimension and rural Postmasters/mistresses should be part of the process to find solutions.
- **The Local Government White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities"** aims to give communities more influence and power, implying genuine consultation. The debate about the future of POs is a litmus test of just how much influence rural communities presently have on issues that determine their future.

Presentation 3) Business Viability View: Geoff Simpson – Helmsley sub-postmaster.

- Geoff has worked at in the Post Office Network for 33 years, largely as a sub-postmaster.
- Views current subsidy uncertainty facing the rural PO network as a grave. Postmasters principally want a clear decision on which would stay open and which would shut ASAP.
- Confirmed that rural POs are losing money as they do not have the customer numbers to meet the required footfall (level of use). The network UK nationally loses approx £4million per week.
- Of 750 postmasters interviewed in the latest Mori poll of sub-postmasters, 46% are using their own funds to keep the POs open, half which are pensions.
- This is because they know that if the PO closes, to some extent the villages 'closes', and that POs provide a wider community service, such as informal advice and opportunities to socialise.
- Exemplified this with the 84 year-old post-mistress who is concerned her retiring would spell the end of the PO in the village which would trouble many people in the local community.
- Aware the likelihood would be to have approximately 2,700 commercial profit making POs offices which tend to be the large urban branches whilst the rest, around 11,000, would be supported by subsidies as non-profit making establishments.
- Reiterated that from the point of view of those who work in the rural PO network, a decision on the future of subsidies is most important as soon as possible.

Questions and Comments

David Andrews, Yorkshire Tourist Board:

- What is the average footfall in rural post offices?
- What is the average spend per head?
- What is the break even point?

Mike Feist: Does not have the data here but is sure it should be available.

Geoff Simpson: A lot of this would depend on the size and shape of the village so there is unlikely to be a straightforward answer.

Shelagh Marshall, Future Years, the Regional Forum on Ageing:

- a) Referred to questionnaire work 'Age Concern' had carried out on the effects that rural PO closures would have on the elderly and disabled adults which was directed towards government.
- b) Queried whether there was any additional subsidy funding on top of the annual £150million.

John Napier: Advised that not the entire subsidy is spent on post offices, some is goes towards innovative new projects related to post offices.

Cllr Geraldine Carter, Calderdale Council: Expressed concern at the potential occurrences of fraud that PO closures could cause, explaining that disabled/elderly people who rely on their carers to get their cash would have to hand their pin numbers over if more secure over-the-counter services cease.

Also referred to the Local Government White Paper, suggesting the rural PO office closure issue needs to link into it and there needs to be greater cross governmental 'joined-up thinking'.

John Napier: agreed and expressed his view that any wider consultation on this matter would be best made at as earliest stage as possible.

Geoff Simpson: added there have actually been more closures in urban rather than rural as these have been ring fenced by government.

Wendy Bundy, Y&H Assembly & Yorkshire Rural Community Council: Referred to the situation in her own village where the PO is due to close. She explained that this would create difficulties beyond the usual PO closure as it also serves as a sorting office for the surrounding villages. Closure would mean staff would have to travel to the new urban sorting office then return to the villages for delivery, involving unsocialable working hours.

John Napier: Recognised the importance and gravity of this issue and is interested in the next steps, but suggested continuation of the same subsidy should not necessarily be the first plan of action. He expressed concern at the lack of information/knowledge available and clarified from his experience in the sector that although the PO network is separate to the Royal Mail, only Royal Mail post items can be handled in POs. He suggested a more sustainable solution should be sought which would include the potential for POs to handle mail items by other delivery operators.

John revealed his personal knowledge and experience on this matter having previously run an independent business to business mail service. From this perspective, if a business was losing £150million a year, then it would not make economic sense for the subsidy to be paid continually. He suggested solving this problem over a longer timescale, taking into account social enterprise & commercial approaches and presenting these early enough for genuine consideration. He also welcomes a debate on future of Rural POs extending beyond Defra and the DTi.

Wendy Bundy: Agreed that looking into more commercial options was a good way ahead, but there needs to be clear measurement and articulation on this subject.

John Napier: An unusual situation needs unusual solutions, asking the Forum whether they would spend £100 million on post office subsidies or in a different way?

Paul Jackson, Howardian Hills AONB: responded by saying that it would probably be spent differently, but it would still be spent trying to support the types of activity that POs deliver.

Geoff Simpson: Added further figures to the discussion, stating that directly managed PO's offices across the country lost approximately £50-£70 million per year. He had heard that 300 directly managed branches to remain and the rest franchised, for example to companies such as WHSmith who already manage 5 post office branches.

3) Progress Reports:

1. **Affordable Rural Housing Event Feedback, Dave Melling, Senior Policy Officer, Bradford Metropolitan Borough Council**

The conference entitled 'Affordable Rural Housing: Lessons Learnt' (Bingley 18th October) was held following Bradford MBC's Beacon status award for 'improving rural services and empowering communities'. It provided housing practitioners, senior officers, councilors, the voluntary and private sector with the opportunity to learn from rural housing work undertaken in the metropolitan authority. It was part funded by the Y&H RAF, along with GOYH and The Y&H Housing Forum.

The key points from the event were:

- Over 80 people attended from various different sectors, including private property development companies, which contributed to a wide ranging debate.
- A focus on affordable renting in rural areas in as well as the 'right to buy' in rural areas.
- Planning and how to designate the right sites, including the development of the Catterick Garrison army base in Richmondshire district.
- National guidance suggests a ratio of 1 affordable home for every 15 market price homes. Harrogate Borough council has a policy of 1:1 whilst Bradford MBC's is 1:25.

- Communication channels were opened with developers to find out whether they are interested to work in partnership and establish how much of a say they should get.
- Housing Associations are looking to develop work programmes for the rented sector and are keen to work with others and to ensure long term sustainable communities.
- There is much agreement on the success of Rural Housing Enablers as a catalyst to move the Affordable Rural Housing agenda forward.

A number of action points were reported:

1. Y&H Housing Forum will be leading a new Rural Housing Group which is responsible for policy and implementation
2. Y&H Assembly expressed interest in using the event's findings, particularly in responding to the Affordable Rural Housing Commission report.
3. There will be further Bradford MBC beacon council events that RAF members will be invited to. The next is for local authorities looking at the relationship between LAs and parish councils.

Questions and Comments on Affordable Rural Housing:

Shelagh Marshall: Wanted to address the position of the National Parks which make up 25% of rural land in the region. She advised NP policy states that 50% of new houses need to be affordable, however in small villages/hamlets 15 homes do not get built at the time, so the national guidance of 1:15 is unrealistic. She added that there had been an enquiry regarding development in the Dales NP where the commissioner thought 100% affordable housing was the best scenario and agreed that more affordable renting opportunities that were required.

Dave Melling: Agreed with Shelagh's point about the small nature of developments in respect to 1:15 and there are different needs and experiences across Yorkshire, but we need to consider how much the public purse should provide. The Y&H Housing Forum are looking to take this forward.

John Napier: Recalled the discussion at the last RAF meeting regarding the importance of affordable rural housing provision, concluding that there was not one rural view and a show of hands was split amongst the group 70/30 adding that this has been further confused by government policy including the right to buy.

Geraldine Carter: Reported that at the Local Government Association event for the Affordable Rural Housing Commission report, Ministers had advised that the ball is in the court of Local Authorities. She also felt the piecemeal government response to the report did not provide an overall picture of how problems would be tackled.

John Napier: Advised the draft RSS advocates constrains rural development. There are tensions on those arrangements, which are pending a government reply.

2. Social Enterprise; Rural Community Retailing. Andy Tordoff, Head of Rural Renaissance, Yorkshire Forward: [Andy Tordoff's Presentation](#)

- The aim of this new programme, the Village Core Programme, is to support the establishment of community owned shops in rural England as viable and sustainable community enterprises.
- Linked to points in the PO discussion and how community retailing initiatives can address this.
- Advised that £2million is available nationally
- Yorkshire Forward will work with the Plunkett Foundation, whom proposals will go to.
- To potentially be delivered through the region's RCCs and/or Business Link.
- Asked the Forum to think about where opportunities for this programme in the Y&H region are and discuss these with him.

3: Tim Frenneaux, Yorkshire Forward, Rural Strategy Manager, RDPE & Y&H RIP update [Tim Frenneaux's Presentation](#)

John introduced a panel of regional representatives for this item: Tim Frenneaux, Yorkshire Forward; Ian Smith – GOYH; Alastair Sim- Natural England and Vince Carter- The Forestry Commission

Tim reported that he was wearing a number of hats in giving this presentation including nationally from central Defra and from other regional themes led by other colleagues.

He advised that it was not great news nationally with further delays to the start of the programme. This was largely due to prolonged EU discussions relating to voluntary modulation meaning no confirmed budget for England yet and reported that contingency plans had been raised in a ministerial statement.

Questions and Comments:

John Napier: Would there be any risk to funding of activity already underway?

Tim Frenneaux: No, these will not be at risk.

Peter Nottage, Natural England Regional Director: Added that any funding agreed until the end of December would not be affected, but the situation as from January 2007 is not so clear.

CLlr Peter Sowray, NY Country Council: Enquired why it is always so complicated in England, also referring to farm payments. Scotland does not seem to have these problems.

Tim Frenneaux: Whatever delays affect England will also affect Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It is central EU discussions that are causing the delay.

Jill Graham, Campaign to Protect Rural England: Asked whether the regional implementation plan finalised and if there are drafts that can be commented on. Also raised concern regarding potential conflicts in funding objectives.

Alistair Sim: Many objectives have been rolled forwards from previous schemes/activity. They are not ranked, but will be scored/compared and those which are best value will be awarded funding.

Lucy Bjorck, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds: Following presentations about the RIP at earlier RAF meetings, is there still the opportunity to comment? An advantage of the EU delay was that it gave more time to work together and for consultation on the Regional Implementation Plan.

Tim Frenneaux: The funding objectives to be taken forward under the RDPE are from existing strategies which have already been consulted on so there will not be further consultation processes. It was good to hear opportunities are being sought, but the detail of the objective cannot be agreed until the budget is known which makes it very difficult.

Helen Wright, East Riding of Yorkshire Council: Was disappointed the presentation did not mention of the part sub-regional rural partnerships will be playing.

Andy Tordoff: Advised that the intention was to build on the existing sub-regional rural partnerships to help shape delivery.

Graham Joyce, Pennine Prospects: Asked whether there would be integration between RDPE funds and the new EU structural funds, and who would be looking to ensure this occurred?

Tim Frenneaux: Defra had actually asked for demarcation between the two rather than integration and we are working on this.

4) Notice Board: A chance for members to trail events and projects.

1) Cllr Geraldine Carter – Update on the West Yorkshire Rural Partnership

- Was formed in 2002, previously known as a rural priority area
- The partnership has developed recognition from GOYH and YF to manage activity and funding such as the Defra's Rural Social and Community Programme
- Commended the work Steph Hiscott had done to help the partnership (Yorkshire Forward's West Yorkshire Rural Manager). See [WYRP information sheet](#)

2) Anne Moyle – Women in Rural Enterprise Activity (WiRE) Activity

- Y&H region has a high membership with 30% of the national representation and more women-led rural business start-ups than anywhere else in the country.
- WiRE are holding an event to disseminate their research on barriers to women going into self employment in the region: Wednesday 29th November, Askham Bryan College.
- Speakers: Sarah Atkinson (Research worker), Prof Philip Lowe - University of Newcastle, Alex McQuirter - Yorkshire Forward. Two case studies to be looked at
- For further information please contact Sarah Atkinson sarahatkinson@wireuk.org

5) Rural Access to Services Intervention Framework

Colin Walker – Humber Rural Pathfinder Programme Manager

Colin gave a presentation on research to establish a 'Rural Access to Services Intervention Framework', led by The Yorkshire and Humber Assembly, and referred to building on work of the North West region on rural service standards. RAF members were invited to sign up to express their interest in attending a workshop to assist the consultants' in determining the region's key priorities.

[Colin Walker's Presentation](#)

Questions and Comments:

Stephen Fox: Unsure what is meant by a 'rural practitioner' as referred to in the presentation

David Fraser, GOYH: Advised it was a term for those employed to delivery/implement rural policy, particularly from Government, it's agencies and Local Authorities. The Yorkshire and The Humber Rural Practitioners Group (RPG) has strong links with the RAF.

6) RAF Organisation – Next Steps Proposal **RAF Chair, John Napier**

John announced his retirement as RAF Chair and set out how far the Forum had progressed under his chairmanship, including links to the recently development Y&H rural governance structures, part of the Y&H Rural Framework. He offered his and Kelda's continuing support by proposing that under the new Chair, Kelda host the RAF's secretariat function and invited the Forum to discuss this. **Further information:** [John's Next Steps Presentation](#)

Questions and Comments:

David Gluck, Ecotec consultancy:

- a) Is uncomfortable that Kelda would take on the secretariat role for the Y&H RAF without it being offered to other corporate business to extend their social responsibility
- b) Shouldn't any decision on this be taken by the new Chair?

John Napier: There is a continuity issue, but at this stage just wants to establish level of support.

Geraldine Carter: Appreciates the generous offer, but does not like the idea either as feels this does not make the RAF Secretariat any more independent. Is happier for the secretariat to remain GOYH based, but with involvement of others. Suggests that the RAF should be made an independent body with a constitution to enable funds to be paid in.

John Napier: Wants to make clear that Kelda would just be providing secretarial support with an independent chair and are experienced with the accounting required. The incoming chair can make any changes in the future.

Wendy Bundy: Considers this a genuine dilemma. Although to some extent agrees with her previous comments, feels that we need to think very carefully before turning down Kelda's offer. Confirmed that this didn't mean she was supporting the offer, but it did need to be considered.

Helen Wright: Agrees with both Wendy and David Gluck's views and also suggests that Local Authority engagement should be gained on this matter.

John Napier: This proposal can either fall at the first hurdle, which is now, or it can be taken forward. Is it too early to ask for the RAF members views and how they would like it to progress?

Paul Jackson: Wants to know of any other hosting offers before making any decisions

David Fraser: Commended John's offer and agreed with Wendy about considering this offer carefully. Wants to include the private sector as much as possible and sees benefit in the RAF being slightly more independent from Government Office.

Clr Peter Sowray: Supported John and Kelda's funding proposal.

Stephen Fox: Is not entirely sure what a RAF does and feels that he and other newer RAF members would appreciate more information on this.

Carl Lis, Yorkshire Dales NPA Chair: Feels rushed into making a decision at this meeting and wants to know when decision deadline is.

John Napier: The purpose of this session is more to get initial reactions. Members do not have to say yes or no now, time to think is fine. John expressed his genuine desire to consult the RAF on this matter and asked the Forum to reflect on this.

Carl Lis: Advised his initial reaction was 'good for Kelda' for putting forward their proposal, however wants to know if there are others who want to propose secretariat support.

John Napier: Would be delighted if several organisations put funds in for secretariat support.

Paul Jackson: Considered that the Kelda proposal should not be dismissed, but we also need to hear from other agencies and consult when other options are available. Would like more information to be circulated to RAF members regarding both putting forward a host organisation/venue and in respect to the selection process.

John's Departing Gift

Following John's announcement, David Fraser thanked John for his important contribution over the last five years and for his secretariat funding offer, presenting John with a gift (Hockney print: A Year in Yorkshire). David confirmed that a new chair would be sought and GOYH would be drawing up the arrangements and circulating them to RAF members in the near future



David Fraser (GOYH) and John Napier

7) Natural England: Update following vestment.

Peter Nottage, Natural England Y&H Regional Director.

- Natural England had their vesting day on Monday 2nd October, bringing together the Countryside Agency, Defra's RDS and English Nature to become Natural England.
- Described NE as an advocate and champion of the natural environment and advised that their 'Strategic Direction 2006-2009' document had been widely circulated to partners.
- They will be sharing their delivery ambitions with partners soon, stressing that they will need to work with others and cannot deliver alone. Any delivery agreement produced will link with existing structures.
- The DVD 'in celebration of the creation of Natural England' was played, introducing Natural England's Chair and Chief Executive and expanding upon NE's main elements of work.

Date of next meeting: TBC, will be late March/ Early April 2007

Action points:

- 1) Secretariat to keep RAF members informed of any news regarding rural post office subsidy continuation.
- 2) Secretariat to circulate information on the nomination process of new Chair to RAF members. *Done 15th November.*
- 3) a) RAF members invited to put forward any secretariat funding or hosting offers to GOYH/Secretariat through yhraf@goyh.gsi.gov.uk
b) GOYH/Secretariat subsequently to present information on offers of secretariat support to RAF members for comments.