

**LGA RURAL COMMISSION/CONFERENCE**  
**13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> September 2005**

**Report by Conference Delegate: Cllr. Brenda Hammond**

Delegates were welcomed to the Commission by the new LGA Rural Commission Chairman, Cllr. Andrew Bowles. Cllr. Bowles is the Leader of Swale Borough Council and a member of Kent County Council.

Cllr. Bowles introduced the first speaker, Paul Downie, ODPM Divisional Manager of Local Government and Fire Group. His topic was Neighbourhoods – Devolution and Political Leadership.

Mr. Downie spoke about regeneration and a number of initiatives to that end with more opportunities for neighbourhood governance, especially in rural areas. He talked of why neighbourhoods matter and the issue of improving local services, re-engaging citizens with public institutions and the desirability of safer greener communities. He said the focus was on effective neighbourhood arrangements, which the government was keen to see, and for variety and innovation but building on existing arrangements. There would be a deal for neighbourhood, a menu of practical options from which communities could choose and neighbourhood charters committing councils and other service providers.

Other issues raised by Mr. Downie were delegated budgets, appointment of neighbourhood managers, neighbourhood contracts and service guarantees, parish arrangements, community management and ownership, communities levying fixed penalties and applying for ASBO's and neighbourhood improvement districts. Of course, funding would have to be found.

This could mean a new role for ward councillors representing their wards to the Council, not vice versa, and possibly having a pot of money.

Mr. Downie spoke of a national neighbourhoods framework and the guiding principle that all people should be involved without unelected quangos but be proportional. He referred to an ODPM publication on citizen engagement in public service entitled "Why Neighbourhoods Matter".

Some rural areas are already becoming involved in this process. One of these is Arun where they have experience of neighbourhood governance. They set up three panels that became Area Joint Committees with devolved decision making with major impact on facilities such as play areas etc. The committees have public question time with limited councillor representation. County councillors can only vote on county council matters; district councillors only on district matters. They have not experienced any problems; so far there has always been a consensus. Councillors are seen to be acting on their own wards and on local issues. Town and parish councils play their part. Ideas for the future include strengthening role and profile, inclusion of community safety and area spending consultation.

The next speaker was Cllr. Chris White of Herfordshire County Council. Cllr. White is Chair of the LGA Regeneration Board that has been in existence for a year. The Board covered economic development, employment and skills, tourism and culture. Dealing with both urban and rural areas, the Board takes a lead role with other agencies such as RDAs, Art Council, DTI, DCHs, etc.

In improving relationships with various aspects of local government, the Board is seeking to increase funding and resources available to councils. The LGA is "doing less but better", each Board agreeing a small number of priorities. The main priorities/elements are:

- Olympics – to promote culture, tourism, health and obviously sport. The Olympics can promote benefits outside London.
- Promoting local prosperity, promoting the role of local authorities in productivity.
- Focus on enterprise in deprived areas, including meeting rural needs.
- Getting more people on benefit into work.
- Lobbying to simplify funding streams through Local Area Agreements.

Rural issues feature highly in the work of the Board, there is a need to co-ordinate lobbying activities and continuing dialogue between Board and Commission is crucial. There is a potential for the Commission to act as a "sounding board".

Cllr. Shona Johnstone of Cambridgeshire County Council then gave a talk on "Cleaner, Safer, Greener". She talked about improving the reputation of local government. The LGA Environment Board has a strategic priority promoting local authority leadership in environmental matters. She spoke of promoting a "whole environment" approach with better advice and support with a more supportive national framework. There have been new schools built with solar sources, etc. She said that county councils should be involved with core objectives and as a key partner with LSPs.

Cllr. Johnstone described the key part of Cambridge County Council's vision and priority with their three objectives:

1. Streetscene and removing clutter
2. Roundabouts with sponsorships and tree planting
3. Communication – partnership – contact centres (call centres)

She mentioned a market towns' initiative (40% EEDA funded) involving five Cambridgeshire towns with consultation and communication.

The LGA and IDeA have launched the "Local Government Reputation" project to encourage councils to improve their streetscenes and local environments to improve the quality of life of residents and the reputation of local authorities.

The final item of the day was workshops, one of which was entitled "Rural Excellence – Driving Improvement in Rural Councils".

The Rural Pathfinders was launched by Alan Michael MP, Rural Affairs Minister. Part of that initiative was "Peer Excellence", a peer mentoring scheme where best practice from the Rural Pathfinders and Rural Beacon Authorities is passed on to other authorities. Originally there were 8 schemes who then went on to mentor a second group and each learned from each other.

Ivor Annibal of Lincolnshire Development, Cllr. John Blackie of Richmondshire District Council and Rob Poole, Rural Economy Officer for Penwith District Council, all spoke of their experiences.

Ivor Annibal explained that the Rural Economy Beacon Councils had put together a programme to support other councils. This was funded by ODPM and DEFRA.

John Blackie said that Richmondshire economy depends on tourism, agriculture, public services and MOD (Catterick). The economy is fragile and vulnerable as Foot and Mouth Disease nearly wiped them out.

Rob Poole said that Penwith has a deep and narrow rural economy with tourism as the main industry, greater than farming or fishing. They got involved with this initiative because they had a vision and they copied ideas from other local authorities.

It goes on – another 12 authorities will be taking part, all pooling knowledge and expertise to each others' advantage. Penwith is putting in for a full-time support officer because they still have one suicide a month. Penwith were mentored by Richmondshire; they discovered how similar their issues were. Local food and farming were major issues of similarity and interest.

## **14<sup>th</sup> September 2005**

This was a very well attended Rural Conference. Delegates were welcomed by Cllr. Andrew Bowles who introduced Jim Knight MP, Minister for Rural Affairs, Landscape and Biodiversity. He spoke of his experiences as a councillor representative at the Rural Commission. He regretted the conflict between urban and rural communities but said that with improving environments more people are moving to live and work in the countryside. The rural communities are growing faster than the urban, with urban people setting up rural businesses and creating employment. Average incomes are higher in rural areas than urban (£13, 959 compared to £12,848).

Good local leadership and partnerships are necessary to maintain good conditions and services. What this means in practice is driving economic growth and enterprise by creating new jobs and tackling low pay, ensuring a

range of affordable housing, access to services and protecting the landscape and countryside.

Affordable housing is a priority, with the ODPM setting up the Affordable Rural Housing Commission (chaired by Elinor Goodman) to investigate this issue and make recommendations.

Rural communities must play a part in planning with communities taking the lead. PPS7 planning must help, attract and encourage businesses. Companies must be able to expand. Public transport is patchy, many do not have a car and conventional bus services are not always cost-effective or sustainable.

Support for the rural post office network is an example of the Government's role in supporting rural services. Each year, rural post offices in England have received about £100,000,000 in support.

Mr. Knight concluded by saying he is determined to find answers on affordable rural housing, to tackle low pay, social exclusion and disadvantage. He is determined to protect and enhance our natural environment.

The next speakers were Tony Travers from the London School of Economics and Julie Hutton, the Senior Rural Renaissance Manager of Yorkshire Forward. Their topic was Funding Rural Futures.

Tony Travers spoke of local government finance, the annual debate about council tax, etc. and longer term "balance of funding reviews. There will be slower increases in public spending from 2006-07; the next spending review will be postponed until 2007.

On sustainable communities, he said there is a public policy effort to balance housing demands and supply.

Local government finance - council tax increases is now a continuing problem for the government. The Lyons Inquiry will be published in December 2005 with the government response early next summer, with the likelihood of small, gradual changes.

He talked of education funding after 2006-07 with ring fencing and the possibility of removal of local authorities schools role.

Referring to the spending review process Mr. Travers felt that following a period of rapid public expenditure, a slow down will now occur with pressure on local authority budgets and council tax with a growth of population in many rural authorities.

He spoke of a paradox in rural areas, that there was a continuing and well-articulated case that rural areas should receive lower funding and often less extensive services. This is despite a clear drift of population from cities to rural

areas. He suggests that the government are, deep down, slightly frightened of big urban areas where problems can get ugly. Urban services are well funded and among the worst in the country.

On the issue of sustainable communities, the government is attempting to provide a balance between demand and supply in all parts of the country with rural protection and protection of green belts. Also attempting to build all new housing at higher densities, smaller and on brown field sites.

Rural resource needs to cope with growing populations, to enhance services funded well below those in urban areas, to protect the environment, manage rural regeneration and to meet government targets.

Julie Hutton talked about RDA resourcing of rural issues. She said that RDA's do not primarily have a delivery role but provide strategic leadership and funding. They need to work in partnership in pursuit of shared goals. Other key shared work areas are rural productivity and economic development, tourism and access to services.

She spoke of Yorkshire Forward's wider processes, a renaissance approach and investment planning. She said that Renaissance Market Towns (RMT's) build on the lessons learned from Mti. The towns were chosen through an Assembly led prioritisation exercise and they take a strategic approach to the town's future underpinned by building capacity of the community.

Local authority support is the key element of RMT success to deliver community objectives.

The last speaker was Dr. Stuart Burgess, Chairman of the Countryside Agency.

Dr. Burgess talked about sustainable communities and the Commission for Rural Communities advocacy role. He felt that local government was very important in managing inevitable changes and keeping rural issues to the fore for positive and practical solutions.

The major role of the Commission for Rural Communities is to act as a rural advocate, to listen to rural voices (as indeed should the RDAs). They act as expert advisers to local authorities and other agencies. Dr. Burgess referred to the publication "Rural Proofing and Shared Priorities". He spoke of independent watchdogs that will say clearly where there are failings and help those with responsibilities. The Commission for Rural Communities is involved with thematic studies and the Affordable Housing Commission.

The Conference then split for workshops where delegates could chose to attend two of four options.

**Delivering Affordable Housing** – this was a workshop led by South Hams District Council with their Strategic Director, Alan Robinson, who talked about their strategic approach for affordable housing. South Hams District has high property values and low wage levels. The average house price is £250,000 with wages 70% lower than the national average, so they needed a strategic approach with internal and external commitment to delivering affordable housing with funding to support plans. They needed to influence key players such as the Regional Housing Forum and the Local Strategic Partnership. They needed to work in partnership with RSL's, a Social Housing Partnership agreement and a long-term development programme. They also needed to work with developers, other local authorities, members and staff. It required an internal organisational and culture change.

He went on to speak of overcoming barriers of concept statement, raising awareness of the problems, community involvement, visibility studies, multi-agency working groups and user forums.

He spoke of the need to link key structure plan housing figures, reduce reliance on exception sites and allocate mixed tenure sites. There should be integrated policy frameworks.

Local authorities must develop a range of models and ideas to tackle the problems of affordable housing provision.

**Better Public Transport for Rural Areas – Lessons from a Pathfinder Area** – Chris Anslow and Iain Aitchison of Lancashire County Council led this workshop. Theirs is a "Better Local Public Transport Beacon Council" and has recently been awarded Transport Local Authority of the Year for success in providing innovative and sustainable transport solutions in rural areas.

They gave some figures for their area, about 13% had no car, 42% had one car and 44% more than one car. They felt that when a transport initiative was instigated, people don't believe that it will last.

For tourism it was found that alternative transport to the car is less environmentally damaging and that non-car users spend more.

It is necessary to identify the needs of local communities, prioritise access to community resource centres, developing appropriate transport solutions such as car share, car clubs and moped hire, taxi-bus and share private hire.

One initiative was the Carnforth Project. An old railway station was renovated and used as a depot for rural bus routes, a part and ride, CC-TV, "rural real time" information system and bicycle lockers. The "rural real time" information post/bus stops are solar powered, low cost to install with low running costs.

A new tourist attraction with benefit to locals is the Waterbus. This is a "packet boat" between Carnforth and Lancaster. The future of the Carnforth Project is threatened because of lack of future funding.

Another project is Wyldefyre, essentially a dial-a-bus service that initially used an old NHS trust owned vehicle. This receives financial support from the Countryside Agency, the PCT and Lancashire County Council. The hospital link has almost dropped because alternatives have been found, but Age Concern contracts provide revenue. Wyldefyre as well as Age Concern does provide door-to-door transport, local demand responsive shopping and other facilities as well as hospital visiting. All of which show scope for working together, although ongoing funding is the major problem.