

Annex B

Defra **Rural Social and Community Programme**

Consultation - Response from Swale Borough Council, Kent.

General Comments.

The message from Lord Haskin's 'Review of Rural Delivery' in October 2003 to decentralise has not been acted on in the proposals being put forward. Instead there has been an amalgamation of organisations at a National level that still wish to control funding and decide how it should be distributed regionally and what it should be spent on. For example 'revenue not capital', 'research but not ongoing support' and associated criteria being proposed.

A committed approach to real devolvement of local decision making and fund raising needs to be made. Partnerships do exist at a local level to make funding have real impact when those Partnership's are empowered properly to consult and provide financial support. These sorts of Defra funds could and should be ring fenced for Parish and Community Groups through Local Strategic Partnerships or District Local Authorities instead of firstly being directed through Regional Offices and County authorities where the process of making busy layers of administration, monitoring, financial transactions and auditing can get confused for being the Project in its own right. The result being lost impact in terms of value for money delivery in rural communities.

Whilst the Partnerships exist at a local level with Community Plans and Parish Plans there is concern about the partnership links the proposed fund will have with existing Defra programmes that rural communities may have benefited from in the past. How will the new fund impact upon or relate to Leader Plus and does the loss of the Parish Plans and Vital Villages schemes mean that the Rural Social and Community Programme is in part a replacement, using some or all of that former funding?

In conclusion we welcome support for disadvantaged rural communities that will make a real difference to their areas and quality of life. Swale Borough Council has a considerable grants budget specifically for that objective that is allocated on a non competitive basis for each Parish in the Borough. It would welcome being able to match it with additional DEFRA funding if DEFRA felt able to empower either the Local Strategic Partnership or Borough Council to work with rural communities and compliment the Local Area Agreement objectives we have with Kent County Council. We are already in the process of securing new community development officers to work with communities throughout the Borough so there is a good link potentially with DEFRA's

resources and their use on actual projects as opposed to new local administration and capacity building arrangements.

In respect of the 9 questions in the Consultation document:

Question 1

Do you agree that the first, simpler formula for allocating resources would be appropriate?

It is very difficult to make an informed response as the phrases 'flat rate' and 'proportion' in Option 1 are not accompanied by any other information to suggest how they are calculated.

In a national context – Kent can be regarded as an affluent county but Swale and particularly its rural areas face particular problems of affordable housing, poor accessibility to essential services, poor public transport provision and have rural pockets of high deprivation. East Sheppey Ward on the isle of Sheppey a rural ward is Swale's most deprived ward and Swale is the second most deprived District in Kent. Therefore we would expect Kent, and in particular Swale, to receive a larger allocation of resources under option 2 than option 1 given the limited information in the document and and, therefore, must favour option 2.

Question 2

Would this way of distributing funding provide the right balance between a) the need to quality assure business cases; and b) the importance of VCS partnerships/ consortia having some confidence on the likely scale of funding before they put together their business cases?

The deadline for producing business cases is the end of November. Working to these very tight deadlines and with an unclear picture of the scale of funding applicable to this area it will be difficult to balance the most appropriate level of local resources to put into developing the business cases. It will be workable if timescales can be extended, funding calculated and administrative layers taken out of the whole process.

Needs to link with the ChangeUp agenda and recognise the VICK consortium that Kent and the District LSP's are working with.

Question 3

Do you agree that, where all or part of a sub-region is covered by a Local Area Agreement, the relevant part of the funding for this programme should be included in the overall funding for the LAA?

As a second best to the District LSPs having and managing the funds directly,
- Yes.

Question 4

Does not apply to Kent.

Question 5

Which, if any, existing partnership mechanism would be the most appropriate for delivering this programme?

Because of the tight timescale in which to build a business case there are challenges in setting up a new partnership. Preference is to build on existing partnerships such as VICK, Kent CAN and Action in Rural Kent working closely with District LSPs and enabling links with complimentary local funding streams.

Question 6

Should the programme reward good practice relating to the joining up of activities with other regional and sub-regional activities and organisations? If so, should this be in the form of higher funding?

Yes.

Question 7

Are there particular issues that you think should be reflected in the quality standards for RCC's?

General agreement that Qs are a good idea and that issues that accompany them such as Parish Plans are important to the allocation of the DEFRA investment proposed. Some of the funding could be linked to developing funding freedoms for 'Quality Parishes' or enabling 'deprived' Parishes to secure the standards.

Question 8

We have set out a very broad scope for the proposed programme. Is there anything that should be specifically included or excluded?

There is no particular mention of rural transport initiatives or training and skills development in rural communities though it is assumed that these will be supported through other government initiatives outside this proposal.

Question 9

Are these the right outcome measures for the programme or are there better measures?

It is difficult to see how the measures proposed will be calculated and what the baseline will be. As an example – 'all rural communities will have access to good quality advice and support'. How will good quality advice be defined?

While qualitative outcomes make a lot of sense in terms of aspiration and in assessing value for money the best that can be practically measured are some positive quantitative outputs for each project/initiative that are intended to have a positive impact on outcomes such as crime, health, mobility, independence, employment.

Could use the rural trends report.