

The Quarterly Meeting between the Regional Rural Affairs Forum Chairs and the Rural Minister at DEFRA with his Senior Policy Team.

This meeting took place on 21st September at DEFRA the new Minister Richard Benyon MP had indicated in advance that he would like the Regional Forums to bring forward papers on broadband, communities, transport and affordable housing. The eight regional forums divided the subjects between them and the South East Rural Forum combined with the North East Rural Affairs Forum to produce a paper on rural communities, in our case this focussed largely on rural mainstreaming, the rural share of deprivation and a guide to rural health commissioning. The text of these reports are available should anyone wish to read them, please contact Janet Dart PA to Leader/Executive janetdart@swale.gov.uk.

Regional Chairman felt this was one of, if not the best ministerial meeting we had attended. The Minister stayed for a full 2 hours and appeared to be interested and engaged with all that was said.

The Minister introduced himself to the Regional Chairs some of whom he already knew. We had a free ranging discussion including not only the prepared papers but many other topics. On rural broadband the Minister opined that he regards this as a social inclusion matter, he stated that it is the intention of the new DEFRA ministerial team to ensure that rural needs are reflected in everything the Government does.

The Minister went on to discuss the following issues:

- He mentioned two initiatives that he is currently involved with, the first is a series of bilateral meetings with ministers in other Government departments to push rural issues and the second is working on a Government statement on rural policies to address rural needs which he hopes will come out in the early New Year.
- He pledged himself and his colleagues to work with others to identify problems and barriers and seek to find solutions. He paid particular attention to the Eden Valley Vanguard Project in the North West. This is one of four of Vanguard Projects the Government has running and has particular emphasis on rural issues.
- He stressed the new Government's particular emphasis on the business sector.
- He gave notice that there will be natural environment White Paper to deal with the future use of our natural environment which is targeted at March/April 2011.
- There will also be a technical White Paper on water issues.

- The Government has a particular interest in young people and what blocks skills etc and how the Government can remove these blocks. DEFRA will be looking at the rural aspects of this.
- The conversations also covered exception sites and was wide-ranging over the right to build, profit element and possibilities of the land owner retaining some interest in the ownership.
- BD UK will making an announcement soon on the subject of accessing the public sector broadband network which will greatly improve services in rural areas.
- It was disappointing to learn that several of the early community broadband schemes in the West Midlands have recently collapsed.
- The Government will be publishing a paper on personal injury and insurance claims. They are seeking to find a way for example that somebody can not be sued if they have cleared snow from curtilage of their property.
- The Government intends to give more prestige to parish plans. Councillors will have to change their whole attitude to take risk and we will all have to change the way we think about Government.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Leader