

West of England Partnership  
25 June 2009

## Rural Strategy Group and rural proofing

### Purpose of report

1. To wind-up the Group and, in the light of this, propose a mechanism for rural proofing in the future.

### Background

2. A Rural Development Steering Group was established under the umbrella of the former West of England Strategic Partnership. When the West of England Partnership was set up in 2005, the Group was transferred to the new Partnership and became the Rural Strategy Group. At this point the terms of reference were revised, the secretariat was provided by Bath & North East Somerset Council and the Group was chaired by Cllr Gerry Curran from Bath & North East Somerset Council, although no other members attended.
3. In 2005 the main topics of discussion were the Rural Social and Community Programme and the Rural Renaissance Programme, both of which provided funding to support projects in the sub-region. A Board was established to oversee the detailed project appraisal and make funding decisions relating to the Rural Renaissance Programme, which finished in March 2009.
4. In mid 2006 arrangements for the Group and for the delivery of Rural Renaissance were reviewed. It was acknowledged that the links between the Group and the West of England Partnership Board needed to be strengthened and it was agreed that the Partnership Office would take over the secretariat of the Rural Strategy Group.

### Rural Strategy

5. In February 2007 further changes to the operation of the Group were agreed so as to involve executive members and, with their involvement, review the Rural Strategy. Since then the Group has struggled to complete this task. Although a consultation draft was approved by the Partnership Board in October, the Group subsequently withdrew this. Since then they have been unable to agree a practical way forward on the strategy.
6. It is suggested that the reasons for this include:
  - The lack of any funding for the group to access to progress projects in rural areas across the sub-region
  - The breadth and technical nature of some of the issues involved, eg transport and housing
  - The lack of ownership/control felt by the Group of the actions required to further elements of any strategy

- The role identified for the Group in the draft Rural Strategy requires resources to underpin them
- The acknowledgement that Community Action, the Rural Community Council for the West of England, might be a more appropriate organisation to pursue sub-regional projects and that local projects need to be progressed through the individual unitary authorities, or at parish level.

### **Lack of outcomes**

7. The absence of clear sub-regional outcomes from the Group's work over the last two years, despite real efforts by its members, led them to agree at their last meeting on 14 May to recommend to the Board that it be wound up.

### **Rural proofing**

8. However, the Group suggested that at the same time the Partnership should recommit itself to the principles of rural proofing. At a West of England level it is suggested that this would involve ensuring that all the Partnership's strategies meet the needs of rural communities. It will usually be necessary to focus at a unitary authority level to ensure that implementation and delivery meets these needs.
9. Community Action, as part of their role, will – where appropriate – review and assess the impacts of the West of England Partnership's strategies on rural communities by linking with the Joint Committees, Boards and specialist groups.

### **Recommendation**

That the Board:

- i) Agrees that the Rural Strategy Group be wound up;
- ii) Recommits itself to the principles of rural proofing.

Authors: Sally Gregory, West of England Partnership Office and Chris Head, Community Action (in consultation with members of the Rural Strategy Group)

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