



RCAN involvement in RDPE

Executive summary

This report summarises the results of research undertaken by ACRE into the involvement of the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN – the Rural Community Councils or RCCs) in the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) at a local level.

The impetus for the research was that a number of RCAN members expressed concerns about local RDPE programme implementation and delivery. Some RCAN members have invested considerable resources in developing projects and partnerships with RDPE delivery bodies which were subsequently deemed ineligible. Concerns were also expressed about programme management and delivery within the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). It was clear that members of RCAN had widely differing experiences when it comes to the implementation of RDPE in their region. ACRE wanted to gather a picture of RCC involvement in RDPE to highlight any issues and problems and also to share good practice and successes.

The research was carried out in August/September 2008 and involved sending a questionnaire to the Chief Executive officers of the 38 Rural Community Councils (RCCs) in England. A detailed description of the methodology is provided as Appendix 1. Full responses are collated as Appendix 2.

Key findings

1. Complications at national and European level delayed the start of the programme and the delivery of benefits to rural communities.
2. The RDPE programme has generally focussed on economic benefits (primarily farming and forestry projects) with more limited support for community development in rural communities.
3. The LEADER approach raised very high expectations through extensive publicity at the beginning of the process which were not consistently met in practice.
4. The LEADER approach has provided good opportunities to engage with local communities.
5. There have been issues for some groups when developing LEADER projects that span two regions due to the inconsistent approach between different RDAs. This has resulted in increased workload and in some instances having to put in two bids for the same project with no guarantee of funding.
6. RCAN members have had mixed success in developing Local Action Groups in their area and in securing funding under Axis 4 of the programme to deliver these activities.
7. The North East region has experienced serious problems when dealing with the RDA which have yet to be resolved.
8. There are significant variations in the delivery of the LEADER Approach within RDPE, for instance in the percentage of funds allowed for programme administration and arrangements for using LAG funds.
9. Some aspects of Defra guidance on RDPE delivery are unhelpful and/or are inconsistently applied, including on funding for posts, funding draw-down, full cost recovery and match funding requirements, creating a barrier to effective RCAN involvement in RDPE.

Examples of good practice

A number of RCCs have taken active roles in supporting and developing Local Action Groups. This has included, for example, forming working groups with key partners, working closely with the accountable bodies and writing the Local Development Strategies.

Bedfordshire Rural Community Council led a LEADER bid on behalf of the Greensand Ridge Local Action Group. We were awarded up to £3 million in June 2008, and will now act as the accountable body for the programme. It will thus form a major part of their activities in the future.

A successful £4million bid was developed by Cambridgeshire ACRE and the Greater Cambridge Partnership on behalf of the Fens Adventurers Partnership Local Action Group. The partnership brings together the community development and economic development expertise of the two lead organisations with local knowledge and expertise from the public and private sectors.

Community First Wiltshire took the lead on developing the Salisbury Plain LAG and was successful in their bid and has been awarded £2.5m between 2007-13.

Recommendations

1. Defra should address inconsistencies in RDPE delivery by RDAs at an England-wide level. There is an acceptance that there will be national variations within the UK however incoherence below this level is not helpful.
2. Defra should clarify guidance provided on RDPE delivery, including on funding for posts, match funding and full cost recovery, to ensure that 3rd Sector bodies are able to participate effectively, and that RDPE implementation is consistent with Compact principles.
3. Defra should ensure that RDPE is able to provide effective support for community development in rural communities. The restriction on funding posts to support the development and delivery of projects severely compromises the ability to achieve the aims of the RDPE programme, and needs to be dealt with in a different way from funding for project management posts.
4. In establishing a UK LEADER Network, the Commission for Rural Communities should build on the model that previously worked under LEADER+, providing much needed capacity-building, training and information for LAG Staff and LAG members
5. The RCAN network should seek to use the opportunities provided in the 2010 mid-term review of RDPE, and by currency fluctuations, to enable RDPE to provide greater benefits for rural communities.

For more information regarding this report please contact.

Paul Dixon
Regional Network Officer
ACRE
Somerford Court
Somerford Road
Cirencester
Gloucestershire
GL7 1TW
01285 653477 ext103
p.dixon@acre.org.uk

Appendix 1: Research methodology

Questions asked in the survey

- Please tell us what your level of involvement with RDPE is.
- What is your experience of working with your Regional Development Agency and the other delivery partners? (Forestry Commission, Natural England)
- Please state which Axis you are involved in and how you are involved.
- What has been your involvement in developing the LEADER approach in your area?
- What has been your involvement in the Local Action Groups in your area, please state which ones you are involved with and your level of involvement?
- What is your experience of RDPE communications (both from Defra and delivery partners)? How could they be improved?
- How much is the Programme being publicised, or planned to be publicised, at sub-regional and local level? And how could this be done more effectively?

In addition there were two questions that related to regional issues

- At a regional level how effective has integration of the Programme objectives been?
- What regional governance arrangements are in place? How could these be improved (if at all)? What are the barriers to improvement?

Summary of responses

Of the 38 RCCs 25 responded to the survey, and further information was collected from websites and publications. Responses were received from

North East: Community Action Northumberland, Tees Valley Rural Community Council, Durham Rural Community Council

North West: Action with Communities in Cumbria, Cheshire Community Action, Community Futures (Lancashire)

Yorkshire and Humber: Information taken from Humber and Wolds RCC website

West Midlands: Community Council of Shropshire, Community First Herefordshire and Worcestershire, Community Council of Staffordshire, Warwickshire Rural Community Council

East Midlands: Community Lincs, Northamptonshire ACRE

East: Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, Community Development Agency for Hertfordshire. Additional information taken from Cambridgeshire ACRE website

South East: Action with Communities in Rural Kent, Buckinghamshire Community Action, Community Action Hampshire, Community Council for Berkshire, Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, Surrey Community Action

South West: Community Council of Devon, Community First Wiltshire, Cornwall Rural Community Council, Dorset Community Action, Gloucestershire Rural Community Council

Appendix 2: Collated responses

The following are the collated responses from the Rural Community Action Network, by region.

North East

Background

THE rural community councils in the North East have experienced considerable problems in their negotiations with ONE North East the RDA for the North East. In December 2007 ONE North East convened a meeting with Northumberland Strategic partnership (NSP), County Durham Economic Partnership (CDEP) and representatives of the region's rural community councils to discuss the development of the Sustainable Communities Theme of the RDPE. Those present were advised by ONE that some activities previously funded under RSCP could not be funded but that they should focus on the following areas of activity:

- community asset development
- support for community buildings management groups
- community development centred on community planning activities
- community transport development

At the time ONE advised that matched funding had to be private or charitable but not public sector and advised against funding of "jobs rather than activities" as part of these projects on the basis that DEFRA had apparently indicated to the agency that it would not wish to see a plethora of jobs supported to deliver the programme. It was pointed out to ONE that without development posts there would be no activity and that there is a considerable difference between jobs to manage funding programmes and jobs to undertake development work as part of projects funding by those programmes. Between January and April 2008 further meetings were held with ONE to discuss potential projects and to explore how the project would fit together regionally. In addition partners met to further develop their plans.

Position in July 2008

Following a hiatus in communication as a result of changes in ONE staff, discussions between ONE and RCCs on the delivery of the Sustainable Communities Theme were resumed in July when ONE advised that the projects would not be funded because they were ineligible. There was a great sense of let down as considerable work had been put into the development of projects and contingency arrangements made to accommodate the implementation of the plans quickly when they came on stream. ONE suggested Sustainable Communities "developmental" projects should be directed through the LEADER process and that they could top up the LEADER budgets to accommodate them at up to 100% intervention rate. It was indicated to Tees Valley RCC that a cross border project with North Yorkshire might be considered. Suggestions for possible project to be worked up for RDPE were invited but to date there has been no response to those suggestions sent at the beginning of September.

Funding Through LEADER

The advice from ONE on the Sustainable Communities projects continues to be that they should seek funding via the LEADER fund through the Local Action Groups. It is not known what potential increase there has been to the North Yorkshire Moors Coast and Hills LEADER project fund which has just been approved. Tees Valley could apply for a project through this route however no project would be allowed to receive preferential treatment and will have to follow the LEADER application, assessment and approval procedures which will be put in place. Therefore,

it is unlikely that, should the LAG's endorse the projects, they will be funded to the level originally envisaged through RDPE Sustainable Communities Theme.

Present position

The ability to deliver RDPE activities is compromised by the restriction on match funding to private sector only. Furthermore, the restriction on funding posts to support the development of projects severely compromises the ability to achieve the aims of the RDPE programme. The cross cutting principle of "a focus on facilitation and networking, animation and enablement" identified in the RDPE North East Implementation Plan requires people who will animate and enable.

North West

Action with Communities in Cumbria had previously been the host body for both LEADER II and LEADER+ in Cumbria. The change process to RDPE has been quite a blow in that they have lost the employing status for LEADER staff and the organisational breadth that this provided. Despite this they viewed the implementation of RDPE in Cumbria as a huge opportunity. This new LEADER approach taking the form of two LAG's (Fells and Dales; Solway, Border and Eden) which between them cover the whole of rural Cumbria. In addition, the whole of Axis 1 and Axis 3 resources are to be channelled through LEADER. Action with Communities in Cumbria active participation in programme development and in the development of the LEADER action plans was at least in part responsible for this integrated approach.

However, the start of the programme has been delayed, at the time of writing North West Development Agency (NWDA) has only just issued contracts and as a consequence Cumbria County Council has only recently been appointed as the accountable body. In effect this means that projects will not start until 2009.

Action with Communities in Cumbria is concerned about how guidance concerning eligibility set out in the Rural Development Regulations is being interpreted. It appears, for example, that decisions taken by the LAGs will have to be ratified by NWDA, that we, as a third sector partner, will not be welcome as a project applicant, that revenue costs will be restricted and that Treasury guidance on full cost recovery will be ignored. Another issue is that the RCC has been working with partners, to develop projects for consideration within the LEADER programme and have recently been told that NWDA intend to take their ideas and subject them to a commissioning and tendering approach. Action with Communities in Cumbria, have found the process both frustrating and disappointing and are concerned over ownership of intellectual property having spent a considerable amount of time and effort developing proposals only to find them taken away and used by a third party. They feel that the way that the LEADER approach is being implemented is not based on the principles of cooperation and local people working in partnership and does not respect the long established specificities of the LEADER method. Consequently this will thoroughly marginalise the RCC and other third sector and community partners.

Within the Cheshire and Warrington sub-region a bid was created by the C&W Rural Strategic Board to access funding under RDPE which focussing on farming, tourism and rural business support, however there is no support for community based development. In Lancashire RDPE is currently still under discussion with the RDA.

The RCCs are involved in supporting Local Action Groups within their areas, for example, in Cheshire a staff member sits on the Northern Marches LEADER Sub-Group responsible for drawing up the Local Development Strategy for the programme. In Lancashire Community Futures and other community representatives are working with the LAGs to develop their business plans or strategies.

Yorkshire and Humber

In common with other Regional Development Agencies across the country, Yorkshire Forward is overseeing the current RDPE and LEADER programmes locally. Following a regional competitive bid, there will be a number of Local Action Groups responsible for putting the LEADER element into practice. 'Coast, Wolds, Wetlands & Waterways' is the Local Action Group (LAG) aiming to develop a LEADER approach across most of the Rural East Riding and adjacent parishes in North Yorkshire. Humber and Wolds RCC has been active in the development of this group. The LAG has been successful in its initial bid and has submitted a Local Development Strategy; the LAG will start in earnest from autumn 2008, using the initial funding to attract additional finance and resources for a range of programmes of activity.

East Midlands

Community Lincs (Lincolnshire RCC) is a member of one of the successful E Midlands LEADER bids – Lindsey Action Zone, also a member of their heritage and landscape subgroup. They have not had much communication from EMDA, the Regional Development Agency.

Northamptonshire ACRE was the Lead agency of a LEADER bid Aug 2007- April 2008 which was unsuccessful, considerable time and effort was devoted to this including contracting a bid writer. They are currently brokering meetings with the view to submitting a possible 2nd round bid for Sept 2008 onwards. Northamptonshire ACRE is concerned about certain comments that were made to them from the feedback panel regarding the costings contributing to core costs. They feel there was a lack of understanding of the principle of full cost recovery and their match funding contribution and are seeking clarification of these points. In implementing the LEADER approach there was initially some confusion locally as one of the strategic partnerships thought they could take the lead on a Local Action Group bid. The other strategic partnership understood the process early on and has been very supportive. In addition there was a technical legal problem (concerned with delivery processes and conflicts of EU/UK laws) over the way LEADER would be delivered in the region which meant even successful bids could not start work: It is not clear whether they have yet started! However they have generally been satisfied with the communications and support from EMDA.

West Midlands

Regional partners have agreed that Leader will be focused on Social and Community priorities. Leader areas selected will be expected to deliver programmes that are aligned to the Community Strategies and to be endorsed by Local Strategic Partnerships. Generally the network has a good relationship with Advantage West Midlands, the RDA for the region, there is a feeling that the RDA have positively embraced the community element of the RDPE programme. All four RCC's have been involved in developing proposals for local action groups in their areas for example Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire sit on the LAGs in both counties and have been involved in writing their strategies. Community Council of Shropshire staff have been involved with formulating strategic plans for both LEADER areas in Shropshire and Warwickshire Rural Community Council are contributing to the development of two LAG's. Community Council of Staffordshire was a core member of a team to put together a Leader bid and is now a member of the Local Action Group.

Community First in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, are working closely with Advantage West Midlands, the RDA for the region, to develop proposals for the LAG's in both counties, they are hoping to submit applications for:

- Community Led Planning and Implementation
- Sustainable Community Buildings (Energy efficient improvements)

- Sustainable Communities Project (Communities and climate change)
- Rural Housing and Young People (Project development officer)

However it was pointed out that the RDA could have played a more active role in supporting the LAG in Worcestershire where there has been no LEADER programme before, especially as this was a new process for the county council.

In Staffordshire the Community Council has been involved in the community consultation exercise and the engagement of agencies and communities within the whole process. The Community Council is a core member of the team putting the Leader bid together and is now a member of the Local Action Group. The Local Development Strategy (LDS) mainly contributes to Axis 3 – enhancing opportunities in rural areas – although it has strong links to both Axis 1 and Axis 2. Farming is a key industry in rural areas and the micro business development under the LDS objective 1 is likely to include some farm diversification projects. They could also have a tourism/ heritage/ environmental element with links for example to farm walks. The LDS objective 3 will support environmental projects that will contribute to Axis 2.

Warwickshire Rural Community Council is a member of LAG's in North Warwickshire and Central Warwickshire, they tendered unsuccessfully for the delivery of strategy and business plan for North Warwickshire LAG (awarded to Staffordshire University). They also participated in consultation events and have undertaken some paid for research for Central Warwickshire group and have put forward project proposals which they hope will part of the business plan. Both groups have suffered from delays and difficulty with organisation, which has meant that the RCC has needed to be quite persistent (particularly in Central Warwickshire)

East

Generally the relationship with EEDA the Regional Development Agency has been positive and the RCCs have been active in developing local action groups that have subsequently bid for RDPE Funds. Two RCCs Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire have led successful bids and Community Development Agency for Hertfordshire has actively attended steering group meeting and supported the successful Eastern Plateau Local Action Group.

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity led a LEADER bid on behalf of the Greensand Ridge Local Action Group. They were awarded up to £3 million in June 2008, and will now act as the accountable body for the programme. It will thus form a major part of their activities in the future. They have a positive relationship with EEDA the Regional Development Agency, Forestry Commission and Natural England. Communications from EEDA have been satisfactory, although the process appears to have been delayed at every stage by issues at national and European levels.

A successful £4million bid was developed by Cambridgeshire ACRE and the Greater Cambridge Partnership on behalf of the Fens Adventurers Partnership Local Action Group. The partnership brings together the community development and economic development expertise of the two lead organisations with local knowledge and expertise from the public and private sectors.

The funding will be allocated to the Fens Adventurers Local Action Group to invest in bottom up, locally led projects designed to foster a thriving farming and rural business economy in the Fens that benefit local communities and the environment. Projects will typically support farming businesses, micro and community enterprises, and develop the tourism potential of this special rural landscape.

South East

The experience of working with the Regional Development Agency SEEDA has been broadly-speaking positive. However one respondent did comment that their experience of working with SEEDA had not been good, another suggested that there are some areas where cultural knowledge and lack of practical experience in programme delivery have caused some (not insurmountable) concerns. SEEDA staff have been prepared to listen to ideas and concerns whilst forthcoming with the mantra that the LEADER Approach under RDPE is not the same as the previous LEADER schemes. More than one respondent commented that they had experienced contradictory guidance in the operations manuals.

Action with Communities in Rural Kent, has been actively involved in developing the LEADER approach by

- Writing the Kent Downs & Marshes LEADER Local Development Strategy
- Chair of Kent Downs & Marshes LEADER LAG
- Member of West Kent LEADER LAG
- Member of cross-sector working group supporting development of three LEADER bids from Kent (involving County, Unitary and District Councils, NFU, CLA, Kent Downs AONB, Kent Community Foundation, Forestry Commission etc.)
- The RCC conducting explicit research to inform LEADER, other RDA and Local Area Agreement process during 2007.

Action with Communities in Rural Kent has taken an active role in the Kent Downs & Marshes Local Action Group, for example they formed a working group with key partners and wrote the Local Development Strategy, worked closely with the accountable body, Kent County Council. They are currently in negotiation with the accountable body over operation of financial and administrative functions, looking at the possibility of the LEADER team being hosted by the RCC. They have also been actively engaged with LAG staff in Cumbria, Dorset, Hertfordshire, Somerset, Ireland and the Netherlands to 'benchmark' their approach to RDPE LEADER delivery.

Action with Communities in Rural Kent also identified that there is a need to develop a UK LEADER Network; they are aware that the Commission for Rural Communities has been charged with establishing this but, suggested that there was a model that previously worked under LEADER+ providing much needed capacity-building, training and information for LAG Staff and LAG members and they are not aware of whether the proposed network will offer all these functions. They also provided more detail and pointed out that there seems to be a lack of national coherence to operation of the LEADER Approach within RDPE. Examples might include:

- Variations in percentage of RDPE funds allowed for programme administration between regions (15% in some regions, 20% in others, rumours of 10% elsewhere; the EU guidance suggests that 20% is acceptable)
- Variations in approach to legitimacy of local "delegated grant funds" operating within the RDPE
- Variations in definition of "a farmer"
- Variations in definition of "a young person"
- Variations in costs associated with programme delivery at the local level; why are some LAGs to be charged less than £10,000 per annum by their accountable bodies to provide a financial administration function, in turn delivering in excess of £3 million RDPE activity, when others are being quoted more than £34,000 per annum to deliver around £2 million!?! Is there a role for the Local Government Association or Audit Commission here

to ensure that the real costs of programme delivery are articulated to central government or the EU?

- Variations in what RDPE finances can be used at LAG level for: e.g. our RCC was not allowed to provide consultancy to run workshops itself to help prepare a LEADER Local Development Strategy as we already had staff in post – hence that work was contracted to a private consultant; it is apparently acceptable, however, for principal local authorities to charge for financial services (providing they provide evidence through timesheets) when staff teams are already in post (a process called “re-charging”.) Elsewhere there seem to be discrepancies on staff recruitment; some LAGs (and their accountable bodies) are happy to see that new posts financed through RDPE should be advertised publicly; others appear to be moving existing staff into roles with a view to draw-down of funds once RDPE contracts are signed...is this genuine new work or using RDPE to subsidise services funded otherwise at 100% through revenue support grant and council tax receipts? Some clear guidance would be appreciated – particularly that which enabled project applicants to use RDPE finances on the same terms as the LAGs through which such resources are to be drawn down.

Buckinghamshire Community Action has attended steering groups and provided evidence for two of the LAGs developing bids within Buckinghamshire. They are currently members of two LAGs – (a) Aylesbury Vale and Rural Milton Keynes, (b) Chilterns, with two trustees also sitting on the steering group.

Community Action Hampshire, have been involved on the steering group for a LEADER project called Fieldfare and have agreed to be involved in the LAG when it is set up.

Community Council for Berkshire (CCB) is a member of the LAG for the North Wessex Downs AONB LEADER partnership and was heavily involved with supporting the AONB with its application to SEEDA. They also provided support in securing investment in the Partnership from SWRDA as the North Wessex Downs AONB crosses the South East/South West border.

Oxfordshire Rural Community Council has an interest in the North Wessex Downs project and is also represented on the LAG covering South Oxon and the Vale of White Horse.

Surrey Community Action has been involved in the development of the Surrey Hills LEADER Bid and is a member of the LAG. The accountable body is Surrey County Council; the bid was provisionally approved in May 2008 and will provide £2m for farming, forestry, horticulture, rural community and tourism projects between 2008 and 2013.

South West

SWRDA actively involved SWAN (South West ACRE Network) in the design and consultation stage and a number of RCC representatives attended SWRDA briefings. Although one person did state that they thought SWRDA was overly bureaucratic and inflexible. Another stated that they felt that SWRDA have over engineered bids to meet their own needs, particularly ‘forcing’ bids together so that areas are much wider than real people would recognise as cohesive common areas.

Community First Wiltshire took the lead on developing the Salisbury Plain LAG and was successful in their bid and has been awarded £2.5m between 2007-13.

Dorset Community Action (DCA) has been very involved in the Sowing Seeds LAG led by North Dorset District Council as their model of community planning and development is core to the bid. Another bid was successful for South and West Dorset and although DCA made offers of support they were not contacted to be involved.

Gloucestershire Rural Community Council has been involved in supporting Forest of Dean (Securing the future for the Forest of Dean), steering group membership, bid and project development. Bid successful, led by Forest of Dean District Council.

Two other bid that they were involved with were unsuccessful these were;

- Tewkesbury and Stroud (Cotswold Edge and Severn Vale) steering group membership, bid and project development.
- Cotswolds and West Oxfordshire Inter-Regional Partnership, cross boundary bid, steering group membership, bid and project development.