

Ref: JL

27 July 2011

Mr John Coleman
Head of Intelligence RCPU
DEFRA
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
LONDON
SW1P 3JR

Dear John

Rural and Farming Networks

The deadline for submissions for putative Rural and Farming Networks is drawing close and I felt I should write to you concerning the situation in Sussex. We have a number of networks and structures in Sussex and others that cover Sussex along with other parts of the South East. Action in rural Sussex convenes and manages the Rural Partnerships in East Sussex and in West Sussex and has consulted the members of these partnerships over your proposals for RFNs. These County based partnerships are also central to the way in which we provide information back to DEFRA, via ACRE and the RCAN network, on key issues affecting rural communities. In our view they are an essential part of the local scene especially when it comes to ensuring the interests and concerns of rural communities are taken up at County level by statutory and other organisations.

I am very aware, after long association with them in the South East, that DEFRA is keen to create a communications network that encompasses the scope of the old regional Rural Boards, Sustainable Food and Farming Boards and Rural Affairs Fora. Historically, in a large and populous region such as the South East, it has been very difficult, even with the application of considerable resource, to find a way of bringing together convincingly the institutional interests of farming, the non-land-based economy, environment, social / community organisations and other diverse rural matters. The feedback I have had from the County based Rural Partnership members convinces me further that this is not a viable project in a time when no resource can be found for it. DEFRA is also creating a degree of uncertainty at a time when rural economic interests have been trying to organise themselves in order to feed into the LEPs and ensure that these bodies are aware of the needs and strengths of the rural economy. The feedback from some members of the partnerships has been that it will be confusing to do anything other than establish networks and relationships on the basis of the approved LEPs. I have identified no appetite to be linked in with a Greater Wessex network other than the limited value that would result from the West Sussex and Hampshire parts of the South Downs National Park being included together.

In the South East I suspect you will get a strong interest from the land based and related industries for inclusion in the new network based on the old South East GO boundaries. I have discussed this with the people leading the bid, the current Farming and Rural Issues Group, and agree with them that it may be very hard to widen the remit of this group to include social and community issues without substantially diluting its focus on the land based economy.

In summary, we are not submitting a bid to be included in the RFN from the East Sussex or West Sussex Rural Partnerships. We are focussing our efforts on building relationships with the LEPs on economic issues and with the local authorities and their partners on wider social and community ones. We are also seeking to integrate as closely as possible with the new South Downs National Park and its requirement it engage across the board in pursuit of its Duty. We hope that you will find a way of ensuring that the intelligence gathering you commission from us, through ACRE, will be factored into the arrangements for the Network. However appealing a single semi-regional, all encompassing, network may appear from DEFRA's perspective the reality is that strong networks develop from the bottom up for specific purposes. On whichever pattern of Networks you place your imprimatur, the East Sussex and West Sussex Rural Partnerships stand ready to work with you to ensure a fully rounded input from this part of the South East.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely

Jeremy Leggett
Chief Executive