

HAMPSHIRE AND ISLE OF WIGHT LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION

31 March 2006

HAMPSHIRE RURAL PATHFINDER

Report by the Rural Pathfinder Programme Manager

RECOMMENDATION

That Members consider how authorities can take advantage of the Rural Pathfinder in Hampshire.

1. When Lord Haskins reviewed the delivery of rural services, he concluded that there were too many funding programmes and too many layers of government involved. He recommended that government ought to deliver more rural services through local government and local partnerships.
2. This recommendation is being taken forward by Defra through its Rural Strategy (2004). As part of this, the Government announced eight Rural Pathfinders in October 2004, and issued a prospectus to guide them in March 2005. The Rural Pathfinders seek to tackle problems affecting local delivery, including prioritising resources, and allowing the testing of new and innovative ways of delivering rural services with a clear focus on outcomes. The Government is committed to mainstreaming the lessons learnt from the Pathfinder projects, including across national and regional Government, within sub-regional partnerships and across all local authorities. It sees local authorities as having a vital role in joining up and delivering quality services.
3. Hampshire was selected as the Pathfinder area for South East England, led by Hampshire County Council as the accountable body.

The purpose of the Hampshire Rural Pathfinder is:

- **How to make delivery of rural services more effective**
 - **How to make the delivery of rural services more efficient**
 - **How to ensure that delivery of rural services is more customer-focused**
 - **How to achieve greater local accountability for public sector investment in Hampshire.**
4. A Steering Group (Annex 1) involving all levels of government and agencies, the voluntary and community sector and the Hampshire Economic Partnership has met regularly since December 2004 to scope, steer and empower the Hampshire Rural Pathfinder. This group includes two representatives from the HIOW Chief Executives Group (David Yates and Will Godfrey). The Government Office for the South East acts as a 'critical friend' for the programme and to help take emerging issues forward with Government.

5. Two stakeholder workshops for the consumers and deliverers of rural services were held to help identify inefficiencies, blockages and gaps and possible solutions, and to prioritise key themes to feed into the Pathfinder programme. Submissions for projects were then invited from organisations or partnerships in the public, private, voluntary and community sectors to address these themes.
6. Seventeen Pathfinder projects have been approved so far and a further two are under discussion (Annex 2). Some of the projects are still in their infancy, particularly where new partnerships have needed to be forged. In the project on Streamlining Support to Farmers, for example, a stepped approach to joint working is being developed between the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the relevant government agencies (which are currently undergoing substantial reorganisation). Other projects have already produced first stage outputs – such as a Community Planning Guide and reports on barriers and opportunities for the delivery of specific rural services including the procurement of local food by hospital trusts.
7. One blockage to rural service delivery has already been removed through the New Forest Consents project. This blockage was related to Treasury regulations about cross-funding between government agencies. The Pathfinder overcame this barrier through a new approach to collaborative working amongst land managers and public bodies in the New Forest. As a result, the area of Sites of Special Scientific Interest in ‘favourable condition’ has increased by 4,000 hectares since 2003, accounting for nearly one quarter of the improvements in the South East region. The next step will be to use this as evidence to influence Government on the need to change regulations on cross-funding.
8. Considerable additional resources have been levered into the Hampshire Rural Pathfinder activities from national and local government, the Regional Development Agency and other stakeholders. Resources still fall short of ambitions, however, hampering progress in some areas.
9. Hampshire Rural Pathfinder continues to play a leading role in support of delivery of the Local Area Agreement. The Pathfinder Steering Group is responsible for delivering some of the actions relating to a “Stronger economy in rural areas”, and there are also other links between Pathfinder and the LAA.
10. The Pathfinder Steering Group has begun to discuss options for the future direction and legacy of the Pathfinder. The intention is not to reach firm conclusions, but rather to initiate debate on the alternative ways forward. For example, there could be potential for a successor to the Pathfinder Steering Group to act as a Rural Delivery Board, as an integral part of the Local Area Agreement; a sub-regional structure linked to the South East Rural Partnership (Annex 3) A consumer and stakeholder organisation could then be linked with the South East Rural Affairs Forum. Pathfinder needs to think about future resources so that projects are not curtailed at the end of the programme.

Date: 10 March 2006
Annexes: 3
Contact: Rosalind Rutt, Rural Pathfinder Programme