

**SOUTH EAST ENGLAND REGIONAL ASSEMBLY
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

Date: 16 June 2006

Subject: **Rural Issues**

Report of: Chief Executive

Recommendations:

That the Committee agree that:

- i. The Regional Assembly hold an annual conference with the South East Rural Affairs Forum (SERAF), in order to help strengthen the relationship between members of the two organisations, and to engage a wide range of stakeholders in dialogue regarding issues in the rural parts of the South East.
- ii. The Regional Assembly discuss the future of the region's rural economy at a forthcoming Plenary, considering a range of factors including diversification, regulation and subsidy, and climate change; and also use this opportunity to raise members' awareness of the South East Rural Delivery Framework.

Purpose of Report:

In the light of recent changes following the Government's Rural Strategy 2004, and discussions at previous meetings of this Committee, this report highlights the importance of developing stronger linkages between the Regional Assembly and the South East Rural Affairs Forum. This paper also reports on recent discussions with stakeholders regarding the rural economy and the South East Rural Delivery Framework, which would merit fuller debate at a meeting of the Assembly Plenary.

Key Issues:

Recent and further imminent changes to rural delivery and accountability, including the development of the South East Rural Affairs Forum, Rural Partnership and Rural Delivery Framework, provide opportunities for the Assembly to engage more closely with partners in the rural sector. Following discussions with the Chairman of SERAF, it appears that an annual joint conference between the Assembly and the Rural Affairs Forum would be highly beneficial in developing this relationship and engaging a wider range of stakeholders. There are also a wide range of issues related to the future of the region's rural economy and rural service delivery which are important for the Assembly membership to discuss.

1. Background

1.1 This Committee has previously discussed changes taking place in rural delivery in the light of the Government's Rural Strategy 2004. The changes coordinated by GOSE have included:

- Setting up the South East Rural Partnership, focused on improving and joining-up delivery, and developing the South East Rural Delivery Framework (discussed by previous meetings of this Committee and endorsed by the Assembly's Leadership Group in March 2006).
- Re-establishing the South East Rural Affairs Forum during 2005, with the aim of it being an influential independent group that seeks to ensure rural issues are addressed in the region, and to be a 'critical friend' to the Rural Partnership.

1.2 Critical to the success of the South East Rural Affairs Forum (SERAF) will be its ability to engage with partners and stakeholders. With this in mind officers from the Assembly have been discussing possible ways of strengthening the relationship between the Assembly and SERAF with its Chairman, Jeremy Leggett, and this paper sets out a suggested way forward. Jeremy will be at the Executive Committee to discuss this in more detail. The importance of developing this relationship was also reiterated by the South East Rural Partnership on 31 May 2006, and in addition they emphasised the importance of raising Assembly members' awareness of the Rural Delivery Framework.

1.3 I also recently attended a meeting of the region's Farming and Rural Issues Group (FRIG), of which Douglas Horner is a member, which was Chaired by Shaun Leavy (former regional director of the NFU). Following a constructive dialogue with representatives from the land-based sector and rural business community, I feel that it would be beneficial to have a fuller discussion at a forthcoming Assembly Plenary on issues related to the future of the rural economy.

2. Strengthening Links between the Assembly and SERAF

2.1 The Assembly already benefits from the link that Jeremy Leggett provides as both an Assembly member and Chairman of SERAF. However engagement between the two organisations has operated largely on an informal basis, and it now seems timely to develop a stronger relationship. It has been suggested that a simple but effective action would be for the Assembly and SERAF to jointly host a conference once a year, to engage members and other stakeholders in discussions regarding key rural issues. The expectation would be to build upon SERAF's existing annual conference for this joint event.

2.2 On a separate but related matter, Jeremy has also indicated that there are a limited number of 'sectoral' and geographic gaps in SERAF's membership. The initial members came forward through a process of 'self-nomination', coordinated by GOSE during 2005. SERAF are keen to fill these gaps, and Jeremy will be able to discuss this in more detail at the Committee meeting. Clearly it would be very helpful if any Assembly members felt they were suitable candidates for the vacancies.

3. The Future of the Rural Economy, and Raising Awareness of the South East Rural Delivery Framework

- 3.1 Following a presentation I made to the region's Farming and Rural Issues Group earlier this month, members of the group (including Douglas Horner) raised a number of important concerns regarding the future of the rural economy, including the impacts of climate change, diversification, European funding, and wider considerations relating to sustainability and quality of life. We agreed that it would be very beneficial for members of the Assembly to debate these issues more fully, particularly in relation to broader 'quality of life' objectives in the region. I therefore recommend that we bring an item on this issue to a future meeting of the Assembly Plenary.
- 3.2 Furthermore, the South East Rural Partnership (SERP) are very keen to widen Assembly members' awareness of the South East Rural Delivery Framework. It has been suggested by SERP, following an initial recommendation by two of the local authority Chief Executives who are members of SERP, that a way of achieving this would be to include it as an item for a future Assembly Plenary meeting. I therefore recommend that we cover this at a Plenary alongside the rural economy item set out above.

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