

Round 7 Beacon Peer Support Fund February 2007 Joint Beacon Bid Improving rural services: Empowering communities

**West Berkshire Council – Lead Authority
South Somerset District Council
Shropshire County Council
Bradford Metropolitan District Council**



Bradford Metropolitan District Council

Round 7 Beacon Peer Support Funding Bid

Joint Improving Rural Services Beacon Bid (West Berkshire as Lead Authority)

1. Background

The four authorities awarded Beacon Status for “Improving Rural Services, Empowering Communities” have worked collectively on the bid with the support and advice of Richard Greening, theme lead from the IDeA.

The authorities represent each of the four principal local authority types as well as different geographical areas in four regions in the UK. They are:

- West Berkshire Council (South East Region) – lead authority for this bid
- South Somerset District Council (South West Region)
- Shropshire County Council (West Midlands Region)
- City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council (Yorkshire and the Humber Region)

Central to this bid is a strong partnership that supports rural service delivery and community empowerment; it is our belief that the award of Beacon status demonstrates the desire and ability to work in Partnership. This bid offers a unique opportunity to work collaboratively at a national level with key partners such as Defra, DCLG, IDeA, ACRE, CRC, LGA and Regional Government Offices. As well as working with local authorities, Local Strategic Partnerships and other local stakeholders (in participating authority areas) to improve performance and partnerships. The purpose of this bid is to inform and help implement national policy.

This bid has been endorsed by Defra (government theme lead) and GOSE (Government Office for the lead authority for this joint bid).

2. Overview of the project

The project will:

- Develop a tried and tested practical toolkit, available in hard copy and also available on line. One of the key purposes of developing such a kit is to demonstrate how Parish plans can be embedded within Local Authorities so that key authority plans such as the Local Development Framework have evidence supported by Parish plans.;
- Develop a virtual self-sustaining network of information, case studies and mentoring support;
- Target 3-8 local authorities for a trial period, with either a poor success record in community planning and/or rural service delivery or that have a particularly challenging set of circumstances, for example an exceptional number of rural parishes to engage, a large number of hard to reach groups;
- Develop the role of the elected members at all levels of local government as leaders in rural communities for “future planning”, improved service delivery and successful partnership working;
- Inform and shape national policy on improving rural services;

- Strengthen the role of local authorities as the lead body to deliver actions in partnership with the LSP, through the LAA, and the new MAA and empowering communities to not only produce locality plans but also help and facilitate in their delivery. Enabling partnership working at the local and strategic level to improve performance and save money ;
- Significantly impact on regional and national ambitions to develop partnership working and deliver community-led goals and ambitions;
- Reinforce and strengthen “locality” working, (the approach developed, although focused on rural areas is intended to be applicable to neighbourhood working in urban areas (recognising that DCLG’s *Strong and Prosperous Communities* Local Government White Paper (2006) draws attention to the value of identifying parishes in urban areas);
- Take rural local authorities to the next “level” of community planning, and through the next three to five years of locality development;
- Enable local authorities to provide value for money services that the community wants;
- Respect local identity;
- Redress the conflicting issues of natural community boundaries with local authority boundaries that impact on services;
- Rural proof local authority performance indicators and outcomes.

Support key government agendas as outlined in the whitepaper for:

- Building stronger empowered communities.
- Community “calls for action”
- Enhanced roles for ward Councillors
- Community focused service delivery and where appropriate devolved service commissioning

Cross Cutting Issues

The project focuses on the rural agenda but recognises that what works in dispersed rural areas can be adapted in geographically smaller, but more populated urban areas. Cross cutting themes for the project will include:

- **Member development** - the role of members as neighbourhood and community champions and the channel for Community Call for Action, developing strong local partnerships, holding service providers including the local authority to account.
- **Democratic processes** - maintaining democratic legitimacy, Scrutiny’s role in improving rural services and empowering communities, engaging and building the capacity of Parish Councils, noting the benefits that can be gained by Quality Status, and improving participation in democracy.
- **Equality** - reaching ethnic and minority groups, building community cohesion and providing equitable service delivery in rural areas.
- **Sustainability** - providing a realistic framework for long-term mainstreaming of community planning and performance monitoring that is fit for purpose but also flexible, responsive and value for money. Most importantly it will retain spontaneity of approach that fits with evolving communities and local government structures.

- **Policy setting** - helping local authorities strategically plan for improved services and rural proof their policies and processes, and developing improved national service standards and policy.

3. What are the projects aims?

The project aims are to help shape:

- 1: The implementation of **national policy** encouraging and supporting local authorities to engage with the national agenda.
- 2: Improved rural service standards alongside government theme leads.
- 3: A framework for local authorities engaged in community planning to mainstream actions from the parish plan process. This can be done in a number of ways; through service plans and statutory documents.

The project will do this by:

- Collating existing and historical national research on mainstreaming local community plans into one accessible electronic document, with clear recommendations to local authorities; It will also review this information in the light of practical experience and the emerging new national agenda.
- “Ground testing” with a number of local authorities (potentially across all regions except London) a range of performance management systems already used by the Beacons to monitor and progress local Community Plan actions, and creating new or adapted versions.
- Setting enhanced national service standards by building on the rural experience of the Beacons and participating authorities.
- Help local authorities to make sense of community planning “bottom up” processes regardless of the specific geographical and/or cultural challenges they face.
- Clearly identifying what good service integration looks like and how it can be achieved.

4. How will the project help local authorities develop?

Corporate Perspective

This all-important element overarches the five modules of the project. What do we mean by “Corporate perspective”? In some local authorities, community engagement and planning, locality working, building democratic participation, effective joined-up partnership working and empowering elected members is a “bolt on” to what is felt to be the “real business” of providing services to residents. This is not just about a cultural change or capacity building (which is a module in itself) but a fundamental look at what local government structures exist, what they are there to do and crucially, how they can do that better and crucially more cost effectively whilst also providing delivering real results and choice to residents.

In rural areas this involves looking at innovative ways to:

- Address the challenges faced by rural residents to access services.
- Help local authorities provide equitable access to services over a much larger geographical area despite limited resources.
- Consistently engage with hard-to-reach groups.
- Build genuine respect and partnership working across all tiers of local government, as well as a whole range of local partners and stakeholders.

Key to this is how local authorities can:

- Work with neighbouring authorities and/or local partners to jointly provide or outsource a service (Transformational government).
- Develop the capacity of elected members in their leadership and community role.
- Develop the role of Parish Councils in defining shared service delivery and/or taking on the responsibility for service delivery.
- Work with the voluntary and community sector groups and organisations to deliver services.
- Plan strategically to deliver improved local services.

5. Modules

The project will do this through the following five modules:

Module one: Research on mainstreaming community plans

While it is acknowledged that there is a plethora of guidance in all regions on how to engage communities in the community planning process with examples of good consultation, consensus and capacity building techniques (some of which have been produced and successfully used by the Beacons such as South Somerset District Council's "Moving Parish Projects Forward" developed in partnership with the Countryside Agency), guidance to local authorities and their partners on how to mainstream Parish Plans is lacking.

The limited examples include the former Countryside Agency's "Bridging protocol" and the University of Gloucester's "Bridging Assessment". In addition the Beacons have examples of their own "bridging" protocols; Shropshire's "Putting the Community into Community Planning", research into mainstreaming the University of Reading research commissioned by West Berkshire; South Somerset's "Market Towns Vision – Bridging Parish Plans".

Within each of the Beacon authorities there are also individual examples of how Plans can be linked to the council's service plans and performance management systems, and the LSP's Sustainable Community Strategy. At the same time, research is being undertaken into the effect of community planning on service delivery. Defra and the CRC have recently commissioned research on "Integrating parish plans into the wider systems for local government – statutory planning and service delivery" and the South West ACRE Network commissioned local consultation events in the South West in 2005. But this information is not always readily available to local authorities.

This project proposes to research and collate this information and guidance into a simple to use guide with clear recommendations, in an accessible web based format.

Module two: Performance management made easier

Mentoring local authorities through the Beacon process and through the IDeA Rural Excellence Scheme has identified that not only is performance management a general difficulty for local authorities, but that monitoring and evaluation of community planning actions and outcomes is particularly challenging. A critical point here is ensure that agreed actions are being delivered but doing this in a way that adds value and not unnecessary bureaucratic burden.

This project will provide a performance management framework that enables local authorities to:

- *Develop a database of performance indicators.*
- *Incorporate local information into the Council's and partners' service plans.*
- *Consider a range of software applications that make Performance Management easier and more cost effective (including e-government options).*
- *Track critical actions, identify barriers and take remedial steps if necessary.*
- *Engage parishes in web-based refreshment of existing Plans and monitoring of actions.*

Module three: A quality bench mark for consultation and engagement

Credible evidence of local needs and aspirations is vital in influencing service delivery of local authorities and their partners. The challenge of ensuring that community plans are the result of a thorough and inclusive investigation of local views and issues is dependent on adequately resourcing the process and building local capacity. The responsibility and cost of this is often borne by principal authorities. While there are a significant number of guidance manuals on how to produce a reliable Parish Plan, there is no agreed minimum benchmark for the process, making costing a difficult thing for communities and councils to determine.

This project will produce a clear national benchmark of minimum consultation and engagement standards to reassure everyone that the parish plans can be relied upon when determining local actions, priorities, agreements and funding.

Module four: Cultural change

Recognition of the challenge that many local authorities face in adopting a community development approach for enhanced service delivery, is the basis for this module. Building the competencies and capacity needed by elected members, staff and partners to work with communities and deliver actions requires a cultural change for many. Despite the existing excellent training and development opportunities provided by the Leadership Academy, SOLACE, Beacon Scheme, Rural Excellence and other programmes, this change is slow in developing nationally.

This project will provide an action learning forum/network for local authorities to access information, advice and updated case studies that address the fundamental barriers to cultural growth, such as by answering "what does a community development approach/good leadership/empowering the voluntary and community

sector look like?” and “what are the long term benefits, including budget savings, that such approaches bring to the council and the community?”

Module five: Service Standards and Delivery

Defra sets the standards for service delivery in rural areas. Its Rural Services Review 2006 sets out examples of how Parish Plans and community empowerment have built capacity of residents to deliver projects that make a difference to the quality of life of everyone locally. The IRS Beacons have played a key part in disseminating examples of their successful working practice through hosting four Open Days, producing numerous case studies, and mentoring a number of authorities either on a shared or one-to-one basis, by delivering workshops either on site or by visiting the mentored authority. While performance improvement is both valuable and essential, much of this experience remains with a relatively small number of authorities that participate.

This project will continue to build on the work of the IRS Beacons and Defra (the government theme lead), in partnership with DCLG, the IDeA, ACRE and regional government offices to influence the development of regional and national policy on improving rural services and empowering communities.

6. What are the outcomes of this project?

The project will result in:

- A tried and tested e-toolkit for local authorities that will include:
 - A community planning “bridging” e-guide with clear recommendations that will work in various geographical areas and across all local authority structures
 - An e-action learning forum/network for local authorities with on-going support, advice and practical examples
- A performance monitoring system for local authorities and/or partners and communities
- A clear national benchmark of minimum consultation and engagement standards for locality plans (transferable to other things for instance as a guide to charitable grant giving bodies for project funding)
- Revised rural service standards
- Rural proofing national policy

The project will do this through:

- Commissioning a research body (e.g. University of Gloucester) to collate existing information on mainstreaming community plans.
- Employing a full-time experienced project manager and part-time admin assistant for 18 months (overall time frame for the project).
- Piloting the initial toolkit over a six-month period in 3 to 8 rural local authorities in different regions. We will also seek to work with a more urban authority to explore how and if this rurally developed approach can work in an urban area.
- Producing 3 to 8 case studies identifying what worked well/not so well for all the participating authorities, and the learning gained.
- Hosting a national seminar to launch the new information.

- Setting up a challenge and review team including a representative from each of the four IRS Beacons, Defra, DCLG, the IDeA, ACRE and regional government offices to develop the e-toolkit and e-action learning network, to inform improved national rural service standards and to inform and shape regional and national policy on improving rural services and empowering communities.
- Holding workshops at national and professional sector conferences (eg policy Network, Laria etc)

7. Cost of the project

<i>What is the cost for?</i>	£ Peer Support Bid (excl VAT)	£ Partner in kind
Commissioning research & report through University of Gloucester £12K for three months work	12 000.00	
Project Manager Degree level post with research background, full-time for 18 months	60 000.00	
Admin Assistant with web experience Part-time for 36 months	40, 000.00	
IRS Beacon authority hosting and line managing staff Office equipment/materials	5 000.00	5 000.00
Initial setting up the e-toolkit (including mainstreaming guide & active learning forum) In-kind contribution by the IDeA for on-going hosting and maintenance	2 000.00	5 000.00
Challenge and review team Expenses: Travel, venue hire (for steering group meetings) sustenance Between 8-16 representatives from partner organisations	20 000.00	
Mentoring 3-8 local authorities for 5 days over a 6-month period Host expenses & mentoring team expenses including accommodation costs	up to 20 000.00	
National seminar In-kind contribution in time by partners	17 000.00	5 000.00
Consultant commissioned to prepare and produce a report for Government 10 days work	8,000.00	
Staff selection & appointment costs	5 000.00	1 000.00
Marketing Selecting participating authorities, advertising seminar, etc	10 000.00	5 000.00
Equipment: such as purchasing specific performance management software	5,000.00	25,000.00
Total	£ 194 000.00	£ 46 000.00

8. Monitoring and evaluating the outcomes

The challenge and review team (see above) will be responsible for:

- Evaluating the programme and quality of outcomes on a six-monthly basis
- Deciding the recommendations to be made on mainstreaming community plans from the report on the research undertaken
- Developing the criteria and process for selecting the authorities to participate in the pilot
- Developing the detailed programme of mentoring for each participating authority and monitoring development/change
- Approving the content and management of the e-toolkit
- Developing improved rural service standards
- Providing a report of its findings and recommendations to Government

9. Time scales

The project will:

- Run for 18 months from the appointment and start date of the Project Manager
- Research into mainstreaming Parish Plans will take 3 months (needs to be completed by month 4).
- The challenge and review team will meet regularly to:
 - monitor the project's progress and commission an evaluation report every six months (two from start of project at months 6 and 12, and a final report to Government).
 - produce recommendations for mainstreaming Parish Plans from the research report (months 4-6).
 - Improve rural service standards including developing advice to local authorities on rural proofing (months 9-12)
 - appoint mentoring teams to produce an individual mentoring programme and work with each participating authority (through months 3-12).
 - develop a benchmark for quality consultation and engagement (through months 7-15).
 - appoint academic research bodies, consultants, multi-media experts, graphic designers, etc as required
- Selection of 3-8 participating authorities will take place in months 3-6
- Mentoring 3-8 authorities for 5 working days, for no longer than 6 months (mentoring period will run months 3-12 of the project).
- A minimum of 8 detailed case studies will be produced (from months 6-15) in a variety of media including video
- Preparing the e-toolkit and e-active learning network for inclusion on IDeA knowledge website will take between 2-6 months (from months 9-12 of the project).
- Host a national seminar to launch information and network (between months 12-18).

10. What are the benefits?

The benefits to local authorities (including Beacons) will be:

- Specific tools to support principal local authorities in implementing double devolution in rural England
- Establishment and maintenance of an e-community of practice over an extended period, enabling new methods of working to become embedded
- Developing a user-friendly resource for local authorities (by pulling together all the information, research, good practice examples and extensively ground tested processes and systems) that remains flexible and can evolve as time goes on.
- Enhancement of national and regional Rural Standards and policy through the practical experience of implementation and use. Ongoing development enabled over an extended period through the community of practice.
- Urban local authorities will be able to access information and on-going support easily on how to mainstream community planning, monitor outcomes effectively, engage effectively with the community, etc.

The benefits to government will be:

- Utilising existing expertise identified and built up in beacon authorities to develop a cutting edge tool for on-going local authority improvement which will provide better services and have a long term cost saving.
- Working with Beacons and a broader range of government agencies and departments to review and support the development of rural standards, rural proofing and rural policy.

