



**“Maximising Rural Regeneration through RDPE: Business Support”
28th October 2010 – Beech House, Lincoln**

WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS

Introduction

This event was delivered in partnership with the Rural Services Network, in order to:

- Explore the range of business support facilities available via the RDPE;
- Discuss and communicate different approaches in the development of RDPE business support activities;
- Consider the practical challenges and solutions to accessing RDPE funding to support businesses; and
- Identify the potential roles and opportunities for local authorities to support the development of businesses in their communities through RDPE.

The following information reflects the discussion notes captured from each session. It has not been interpreted and has been transcribed as it appeared on the flipcharts on the day of the event.

Discussion Write-ups

Session 1: The perspectives and partnership opportunities arising from the role of Higher and Further Education Bodies in Business Support - Green Table

- How have land based sectors re HE and FE and skills and training linked to RDPE?
 - mainly LANTRA
 - more potential
 - how does the localism agenda fit with this?
- Localism issues
 - Patchwork of LEPs therefore gaps in provision.

- Value of spin-offs? e.g. media & technology
 - harder from the larger businesses
 - spin-offs e.g. caterers – increase in output of businesses rather than new businesses
 - innovation generated e.g. food trial and tasting.
- Potential is great e.g. micro niche enterprise to work with HE & FE development i.e. using food trial and tasting (links to artisan SMEs).
- How can micro businesses around the country link up with this model? (FE & HE)
 - Another example is Cornwall Duchey College and Harper Adams etc so there is beginning to be a network of links between SMEs and micro businesses and HE & FE (skills agenda).
- But national institutions are not co-ordinating as well as they could especially in horticulture.
- Need to work with LEPs with this agenda.
- Contradiction between localism agenda and centralised HE & FE development.
- LAGs link to Education & Business Partnership but are not so engaged with HE & FE agenda.

Key Points:

- 1) Funders, deliverers, local businesses and facilitators need to be working better together in this new “LEP world” – there are examples of this happening now so build on it;
- 2) Feed this into the next Programme. Use examples of LAGS linking upwards to shape discussions around post 2013 discussions re food economy and food security, role of skills, training, HE & FE in the context of localism & LEPs i.e. SMEs etc.

Session 1: The perspectives and partnership opportunities arising from the role of Higher and Further Education Bodies in Business Support – Red Table

- The University of Lincoln is a good example of a university being involved in supporting local businesses.
- Landskills Programme in the East of England is working with food producers (£4 million funding programme).
- The issue is that colleges / universities are currently restructuring – having to be quite inward facing at present rather than looking to invest.
- North Yorkshire doesn't have a university structure to replicate the University of Lincoln example and support local businesses.
- There was specific reference to aligning with the County Council in the University of Lincoln example. Potential for HE & FE sector to align with business bodies directly e.g. Chambers of Commerce / NFU / Federation of Small Business?
- The East of England is exploring the possibility of supporting the University of East Anglia's (UEA) Project Evolve.
 - Placing graduates with local businesses (40% of Norfolk graduates placed got jobs).

- In the North – Knowledge Transfer Graduates. The issue is retaining graduates in the North as they tend to head South after graduation. HE / FE bodies in the North are less integrated with LAs and businesses so there is scope to develop links there.
- Graduate retention is also an issue in Lincolnshire but the University of Lincoln's example can only help. What other programmes exist to help with graduate retention in Lincolnshire?
- There is a need for support to help advertise / promote the food industry as an “attractive” option. It can be quite isolating – e.g. factory work / rural / solitary.
- Through facilitated project development programmes the East of England has been able to link training for migrant workers / Chambers of Commerce etc.
- There is a need to support small businesses (of less than 5 employees) as well as larger organisations. Local Enterprise Government initiatives in the North are a way of supporting small businesses, as is the Federation of Small Businesses.

Key Points:

- 1) The link between the HE / FE sector and local authorities and local business is ESSENTIAL – the University of Lincoln is a great example!
- 2) It is important that this mechanism (if consistent) links up “sub-nationally” to exchange practice – potentially through the LEPs.
- 3) The University of East Anglia's “Project Evolve”. Placing graduates in rural businesses e.g. depends on the enterprising nature of colleges / universities or not?

Session 1: The perspectives and partnership opportunities arising from the role of Higher and Further Education Bodies in Business Support - Blue Group

- Artificial clusters may not work – they have to develop naturally.
- University supporting the natural development of food production and engineering.
- Tourism has not yet been developed.
- Small businesses are taking up opportunities to support larger FE & HE activities.
- Identification as a “new university” opportunity to support this sector.
- Businesses supporting their development through innovation – work with farmers to produce what is needed.
- Advice and support can come from universities to support LAGs and others when looking at projects.
- Other LAGs have developed links with FE & HE bodies but the levels of engagement vary from LAG to LAG.
- Elements of scale when engaging with FE & HE e.g. some small businesses do not need everything that FEs & HEs can offer. Focus on what the business wants and how much it wants to be supported.
- How can FE & HE help re-skill people for what a business needs? Public to private sector.
- Encourage large supermarket chains to invest in FE & HE to help the development of the food chain.

Key Points:

- 1) FE & HE engagement can be a positive factor but it is not straightforward.
- 2) Lots of universities want to engage on their agenda, not on what the business needs.
- 3) Keep trying to engage with FE & HE even if it has not been successful in the first instance.

Session 2: The Business Link perspective and the changing landscape for business support - Green Group

- Will be more focused on short term engagement rather longer term relationships?
- Interface needed i.e. complicated programme.
- Solution = closer interface via LAGs / NFU, but only if people know the money is there.
- Need to increase the understanding of land agents.
- What is the future of business support? We need to understand quickly – will not go to LEPs.
- Role of LAGs - How can they co-ordinate the local authorities' approach to business support / advice? e.g. Norfolk & Suffolk.
- How can we learn from the experience of Business Links around the country e.g. NW Business Link?
- Getting accountants on board is essential.

Key Points:

- 1) What is the impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review on Business Link? Reduction from 340 to 138 staff. Still some front line delivery for RDPE. Uncertainty gap created, geographic differences. So how will RDPE reach businesses in the future?
- 2) Marketing, marketing, marketing.
- 3) Last two years of the programme – in future how can LAGs / Business Links / NFU work together? But will the cement go when RDAs go?

Session 2: The Business Link perspective and the changing landscape for business support – Red Group

- Business Link phone service – limited knowledge of agriculture & horticulture issues.
- The relationship and link with face-to-face advisers in the East Midlands has been positive.
- Localised specific knowledge = potential chink in the armour!
- Knowledge, skill and information of advisers is critical – locally relevant vs. locally irrelevant.
- It is important for advisers to understand the local geography.
- “1st touches”, the “feel” of Business Link’s purpose and first impression for applications and beneficiaries is not always what it should be.

- Going forwards Business Link services are likely to be phone based / website but the issue is that not all rural businesses will have sufficient access to broadband for future service.
- Business Link is not as clearly packaged as it used to be.
- Business Link should be more focused on the “quality” of the interaction as opposed to being target driven.
- Is there a potential for a return of the Enterprise Agencies – not just concerned with Business start-up?
- Specialist rural business advisers would be beneficial.

Key Points:

- 1) Specialists (with specialist knowledge) should visit rural businesses prior to any application in order to build capacity and support the development of the business.
- 2) Advisers need to be accessible and have local knowledge, information and skills to sign post businesses in the right direction.
- 3) Offers should be differentiated depending on the size of the business i.e. one size doesn't fit all.

Session 2: The Business Link perspective and the changing landscape for business support – Blue Group

- Lots of approaches to Business Link through the country and variety of experiences.
- Working in partnership with RDA.
- Business Link providing a point of contact for people who wish to access RDPE funding.
- Going direct to the relevant person who is best able to answer the question posed by the individual making contact.
- There is some Business Link engagement with LAGs.
- There is a diverse range of business needs and this can cause issues around the expertise of advisors.
- Change of delivery organisations and the knock on effect of that.
- Emphasis that LEPs have a rural agenda.
- Plunkett Foundation – supporting local village shops, looked to Business Link for help with that.
- Business Link rationalisation – incentives to provide business support. No motivation and losing goodwill.
- The opinion is that support has to be done the one way and anyone not doing this is stifled.
- There needs to be confidence in the system.
- The Business Link website is a great source of information to prospective customers.
- In this changing landscape, it is hard to know who to get business support from.
- There will be changes to the way that Business Link works in the future.

Key Points:

- 1) Business Link differs, depending on where you live in the country and the level of service differs too.
- 2) With a cut in funding will Business Link be able to support Rural Businesses?
- 3) People have to have trust in the advisory service they are using.
- 4) All groups with a rural agenda must maintain an input into future support.

Session 3: The “on the ground” challenges of generating good business support projects from the perspective of a Local Action Group - Green Group

- How do you deliver business support / enterprise if it is not part of the LDS? Share via the RDPE Network discussion forum.
- Business support around woodland economy – National Forest i.e. they did not get LAG status so used RDPE in other ways.
- Networks of existing contacts can help with this and local authorities can help identify these networks.
- Issue of funds being allocated but not being spent.
- The role of champions as LAG members (for an interest area e.g. woodland).
- LAGs and Business Link to help each other out e.g. Business Link sits on N Pennines, they can help identify duplication and talk through application issues.
- Business Link needs to build links with rural areas.
- How to optimise the different business support mechanisms.
- We still need to understand the context of delivery for the remaining period to 2013 – we need to understand this to understand how business support can most effectively be used / delivered in the remaining period.
- Forestry case studies i.e. how they have maximised RDPE. E.g. Northwoods / Rural Development Initiatives.

Key Points:

- 1) Inconsistency about interpretation of guidance / regulations. How you present the projects.
- 2) How do you find the capacity to support the individuals and organisations to access RDPE funding? Need support to deliver quality projects coming forward. Link to Big Society.
- 3) The application process is still too lengthy against the funding being allocated.
- 4) Role of Defra in ensuring the programme has a successful conclusion especially in meeting the need emerging at sub-regional areas (leadership of programme).

Session 3: The “on the ground” challenges of generating good business support projects from the perspective of a Local Action Group - Red Group

- Great examples offered up by Cornwall and good value elements of business diversification.
- Farmers value advisors but should RDPE funds be used to employ them? In the absence of anything else RDPE is preferable to nothing.
- LRSN (Lincolnshire Rural Stress Network) has an outreach role.
- Objective 2 money is being used in Lincolnshire to fund some Business Link advisors.
- Is there a summary of the help / support available to small farmers?
- Accountants / Land Agents etc should be advising farmers of the funding available.
- It is just as important to hear about lessons learned as it is to hear about successful projects – to avoid the same mistakes happening.
- Would like to learn more about the Cornish farmers growing test crops, the landrover project and fisherman’s smock project e.g. measure, approach etc.
- It is difficult to get positive messages out on the ground because applicants find RDPE confusing.
- East Lindsey LAG have been working on integrating with bodies such as FSB, the RDPE Network etc.
- Geographical constraint of leader – not all of the East Midlands is covered.
- National consistency for RDPE could resolve some of the current issues being experienced but will localism enable this? – Leader.
- When will Defra decide on the delivery of the remaining RDPE and how will future programmes be managed?
- Would rural businesses be prepared to pay for business support?
- In Northern Ireland a diversification course is offered at university. Farmers can attend in the evening and, with the support of peers, build a business case which is ready to be submitted for RDPE funding by the end of the course.

Key Points:

- 1) Stronger communications is necessary – to share scepticism, lessons learned and helping farmers understand what delivery bodies are trying to achieve.
- 2) Develop stronger network systems.
- 3) Listen!!! AND LEARN from mistakes.

Session 3: The “on the ground” challenges of generating good business support projects from the perspective of a Local Action Group - Blue Group

- There is a time factor involved in support.
- The workload and decision-making process need to be managed.
- Challenge of using IT – to help agreement.
- Engage with others outside of RDPE to help facilitate projects.

- In the North East pull together LAG managers for a practitioners' quarterly meeting.
- The Fens Adventurers are marketing the programme - problem of targeting people who are eligible.
- Business Link is feeding in potential projects to LAGs.
- Different regions have different programmes.
- There are different interpretations of what can be funded under "Business consultancy".
- Cumbria can use RDPE funds to help pull together a business case.
- Don't reinvent the wheel, use support from others who have been successful.
- Use of M331 in Cornwall.
- Less face-to-face meetings from Business Link in Cornwall.
- LAGs could be supporting innovation for micro businesses.
- Technical ability to be able to pay for support for businesses.
- People have to be encouraged to contact Business Link but there are issues around whether previous engagement may limit the support available.
- Changing perceptions of Business Link and wider business support.
- Expectations need to be managed.

Key Points:

- 1) Try to find some broad consistency in business support across the country. Allow local flexibility.
- 2) Share information effectively between different delivery organisations at different levels e.g. national, regional.
- 3) Manage expectations within the programme.

Session 4: A regional overview of business support through the RDPE across Axes 1 & 3

Unlike the previous three workshops where discussions took place at tables, participants were asked, during this last session of the day, to split into four groups and stand against one of four flipcharts positioned against each wall of the room. Each group was given a different colour pen and asked to add their thoughts and ideas to the question written on the flipchart in front of them. After a few minutes the groups rotated clockwise, taking their pens with them, to add their thoughts and ideas against the question on the next flipchart. They also put a cross or tick against the previous group's ideas to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with them. This rotation continued until all groups had added their ideas against the question on each flipchart.

The comments provided by the groups have been typed up in the colours in which they appeared on the flipcharts:

1. Wider considerations for business support

(e.g. contribution of land-based sectors to the local economy, environment and communities)

- Farm land risk mitigation – management! Energy opportunities
- Taking forward *emda* work – e.g. Rural Estates – wider impact of estates

- Smaller businesses in rural areas (home working etc) ✓✓✓
- Supporting wider supply chain (e.g. for food, energy, workspace etc). And local procurement (e.g. NHS etc)
- Impact on labour market – impact on local services / community / skills / travel costs / affordable rural housing
- Capturing and using local cultural knowledge ✓
- Understanding the specific needs of “land-based” sub-sectors – e.g. woodland economy ✓ If any left!
- The land-based sector is the critical supply chain originators for a huge raft of the jobs!
- Land-based sectors manage the land and improve the environment
- Development of co-operatives and social enterprises ✓✓
- Sustaining rural facilities (e.g. shops, pubs, schools etc) ✓
- Role of market towns
- Relaxation of planning regulations
- Broadband access

2. Strategic Key Roles and Functions for local authorities in Business Support

(e.g. making sure that distributing bodies understand their area)

- Come out of the way
 - LAs should avoid complicating / duplication. They should complement / add value. ✓✓
 - LAs to concentrate on what they're good at.
- Effective communication
- Signposting through public sectors maze ✓✓ × Not LAs role
- Create the conditions (do what they should do well) i.e. Planning ✓
- Local Development Framework
- LEP development.
- Preparing Local Economic Strategies – to identify needs. Many LAs don't have these!
- Develop funding bids e.g. LEADER ✓
- Communicate. LAs need to tell each other what they are up to and work together!
- With the demise of RDAs, will LAs understand the strategic challenges?
- Addressing market failure to deliver strategies
- Managing Political expectations
- Creating clear vision for the area and communities.
- Can the business sector look after itself in the Big Society? If so, reduce LA support.

3. Practical Key Roles and Functions for LAs in Business Support

(e.g. disseminating information about business support activities) ✓✓

(e.g. providing practical help with completing applications)

- Are they effective?

- Appropriate skill set? ✓✓

- Conflict of interests?

- Capacity at LA insufficient

- ~~Will~~ Should there be local authority business support? or in the same way? LEP to gap fill business support
- Will the LAs have the money?
- Important roles:
 - Sign Posting ✓✓×
 - Providing information ✓✓✓
 - Facilitating e.g. diversification ✓✓ (planning) ✓
 - Network facilitation (business to business) ✓✓✓
 - Simplify processes ✓✓
e.g. absorb red-tape etc as much as possible.
- Role of capacity building and empowerment of communities and businesses ✓
- How fit for purpose will the new structures be? LA role is to help ensure that
- LA to contribute to an effective integrated partnership with private sector and HE input ✓ ✓
- Providing managed workspace and employment land
- Use LA land
- Lobbying on behalf of local businesses
- Utilising their assets for local business in the most effective way

4. How can LAs share existing experience / delivery of business support activities?

(e.g. Via Regional Rural Affairs Fora) ✓✓✓

(e.g. Via LA Discussion Forum on RDPE Network website) + practical workshops ✓✓

(e.g. via RSN)

- Ensure members and officers are engaged.
- Need to engage with local businesses e.g. Business Councils. FSB etc.
- Need to link into FE & HE.
- But it depends on the LA and their interest / dynamism in these areas ✓
- LEP's key role? If there is oneIf not, who takes the lead? ✓
- Publish national case studies ✓

- RDPE at National LGA Conference ✓ + via knowledge bank at IDEA
- Who owns the data / intelligence about “Business support” when RDAs go? ✓ ✓
 - Intellectual property rights
 - Who will maintain data?
- Avoid losing knowledge and history / learning (institutional memory!) ✓
- Continue network activities (despite freeze on marketing expenditure) ✓
- Mapping and distilling of best practice - analysing and distributing ✓