



**‘Maximising Rural Regeneration through RDPE: Environmental Support’
8th July 2010, 10.30 to 16.30, The Studio - Birmingham**

KEY MESSAGES AND ACTION POINTS

1. Introduction

In response to requests from local authorities, the RDPE Network and Rural Services Network are working together to deliver a series of four workshops focusing on ‘Maximising Rural Regeneration through RDPE’.

These workshops aim to provide the opportunity for local authorities to share and exchange ideas, practice and experience on how RDPE can be used within their territories to sustain their economic and environmental agendas. The first workshop focused on the 'local action' elements of RDPE delivery and the remaining workshops through 2010-11 will look at ‘business support’ and ‘integrated rural development’ within the context of RDPE delivery.

This second workshop was about the “environmental support” that is available through the RDPE and its purpose was to:

- Share ideas, experience and practice amongst local authorities from those already participating, supporting or accessing funding for environmental activities;
- Identify new opportunities and approaches for local authorities to support the accessing of funding and generation of outputs and outcomes in relation to the RDPE environmental support agenda; and
- Identify challenges and seek solutions to more effective engagement in the RDPE environmental agenda.

2. Workshop Programme

The emphasis of the day was on active participation. The workshop was split into 4 sessions, each providing a different perspective on RDPE environmental support and opened by an individual who provided a short overview of his/her experience in order to prompt discussion. For the remainder of the session participants were divided into three working groups, the make-up of which changed after each session. During this time they had the opportunity to comment on the ideas and points raised by the speaker and to share their own experiences.

The complete [programme, speaker presentations, session discussions and other information](#) from this workshop are available via the [RDPE Network website](#).

3. Next Steps

The key messages from the small group discussions were fed back in plenary during the closing session of the day. These will be forwarded to Defra and the delivery bodies as part of the follow-up activity to this event and are included below.



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3.1 Key Messages:

Session 1: Environmental Stewardship on Council Land

There are significant benefits which can be achieved directly (i.e. in terms of their own activities) and indirectly (i.e. in terms of supporting the activities of others for community benefit) by Councils becoming more actively engaged in accessing RDPE Axis 2 funding.

To do this successfully a number of things are important:

- 1) The development of relationships and trust between landowners, Local Authorities and Natural England/Forestry Commission in identifying and delivering environmental objectives – local authorities can position themselves at the heart of this agenda if they are pro-active.
- 2) There is real variability across the “local government family” in terms of accessing and using RDPE and particularly Axis 2 funding and local government should think about how this might be addressed.
- 3) It is not difficult to build up the know how to access RDPE funding and it can be used imaginatively to support for example; countryside skills; to work with local communities and small landowners to realise their aspirations for the countryside and to underpin the cost of managing local authority open space.
- 4) RDPE is more flexible than is sometimes assumed for example you can mix Natural England and Forestry Commission Axis 2 funds for some projects.
- 5) There is scope to think laterally and to use already planned activities and earmarked funding in a way which provides a match to Axis 2 if bids are carefully thought through.
- 6) Where expertise in drawing down RDPE funding for these purposes by local authorities exists ie: Bradford MDC and Northumberland National Park, more work should be done to share it more broadly.
- 7) Natural England and the Forestry Commission would benefit from further developing their thinking on how best to engage with local authorities in terms of the role of the councils in promotion RDPE and providing of matched funding for the Councils own or other applicants projects.

Session 2: Local Community Perspective on RDPE and the Environment

There is definitely scope for environmental focused community organisations to access RDPE. The process does involve a number of challenges for such organisations and is perhaps, because of its current focus on landowners a little less accessible than it might be.

A number of key issues arise when the engagement of local community organisations with RDPE are considered.

- 1) Good projects may not be realised in some cases because community organisations lack the know how or support to access RDPE Axis 2 funds – local authorities could help them as intermediaries in this – with issues such as bidding, financial management and legal and practical delivery structures.
- 2) The current drive to empower community groups more effectively to engage in taking responsibility for themselves, will undoubtedly have an environmental component and where activities are relevant to Axis 2 there will be an opportunity to draw down RDPE funding.
- 3) As with all good community based projects it will be important where initiatives of this nature are supported to ensure that the sponsoring organisations have thought through an exit strategy which makes the projects sustainable for the long term.
- 4) Natural England and the Forestry Commission have an opportunity to be pro-actively engaged in stimulating the interest of community groups in this context more actively. In some cases this might involve, working with local authorities to engage communities and manage risk going forward in terms of supporting the development of proposals.



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Session 3: A Strategic Perspective

Natural England and the Forestry Commission are both committed to working with local authorities where their mutual engagement can help make a difference to delivering impact through RDPE.

The following points are important in developing a dialogue with land owners and managers to ensure the effective maximisation of the benefits of the fund in partnership with Councils:

- 1) Understanding and speaking the language of likely applicants. Organisations in the land based community need focused and effective engagement and a working knowledge of land based issues is important if engagement is to be maximised
- 2) The most successful interventions will be those which concentrate on integrated rural development – local authorities and NE/FC have an opportunity to work together in terms of understanding the role Axis 2 funds can play more broadly in projects which cover and join up the following themes for communities:
 - Economic
 - Environment
 - Social
 - Resource Use
- 3) Delivering joined up outcomes and being “farmer friendly” are both challenging but achievable elements of a best practice approach to maximising the impact of RDPE – they do however need time and effort investing in them and local authorities and Natural England/Forestry Commission should consider how best they might work together to achieve this – perhaps through training or the development of good practice notes. Space should certainly be found to enable local authorities and the RDPE delivery bodies at the regional or even sub-regional level to interact and work together more effectively and regularly
- 4) In some cases where a farming family or individual or community group are receiving support from a number of agencies at the same time there needs to be careful consideration and management by the public sector bodies to avoid the client being overwhelmed or receiving a “patchy” service. In thinking these issue through the scope for positive engagement of Councillors as community representatives should also not be overlooked in terms of their ability to act as key intermediaries.

Session 4: Forestry Across the Axes

There are already some good examples of interaction between the Forestry Commission and Local Authorities. The following areas of interaction could be developed further:

- 1) Local authorities should ensure that all woodlands they wish to include in schemes are registered
- 2) The Forestry Commission is keen to consider the broader social dimension and outcomes of its activities when it looks at Axis 2 proposals
- 3) There is considerable scope for further strategic dialogue between the Forestry Commission and local authorities although the overall resources of the Forestry Commission particularly in terms of staff are far more modest than those for example of Natural England. It would be good for local authorities to recognise this and where appropriate initiate contacts - ideally setting up a structural relationship
- 4) There is scope for greater engagement in and understanding of woodland issues by local authorities to enable them to play an effective role in this agenda
- 5) Not just in terms of the Forestry, but more broadly, there is real value in local authorities working alongside Natural England and the Forestry Commission to consider what the next funding programme (from 2013) might look like and how it might be shaped with the engagement and support of local authorities



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3.2 Follow-up Action

In addition to the key issues and activity identified above, participants fed in their reflections and comments about the day via a feedback form. 100% of participants said that they found the workshop either useful or very useful and they identified the following actions that they would carry out as a result of attending the workshop:

- Communicate back to LAGs the integration opportunities to see if we can improve on maximising the benefits;
- Look at Nigel Lowthrop's website to review the Hill Holt Wood model;
- Further explore options for RDPE / other opportunities in my local area;
- Look to work with the Forestry Commission and Natural England at a more strategic level;
- Contract Adrian Banford, take forward a meeting of all those involved with RPA payments within the council and feed information into Meres and Mosses Landscape Partnership;
- Invite LAG / RDA RDPE partners on site to discuss wider management of land and then discuss how RDPE can best support this;
- Research RDPE more, especially in relation to my role (landfill reformation) and also research Natural England funding opportunities;
- Keep in contact with a few people who attended and also consider more the expectations of farmers when approaching them and let them do the talking;
- Maximise environmental supports that are available to local authorities;
- Look into how RDPE axes can be used for projects in Shropshire. Also find out what Small Woods Association / Heartwoods have done to map woodland in Shropshire and find out what Shropshire Council's woodland holding is;
- Contact a Director in Natural England;
- Think about communicating farmers' needs to more local authorities and stakeholders;
- Talk to Graeme Kerr re finding Natural England representatives in each region to represent NE to the RDPE Network;
- Assess the level of engagement from Telford and Wrekin to further engagement;
- Forward details of HLS agreement to contacts made here;
- Investigate wider use of social enterprise in delivering grant opportunities and integrated projects;
- This event has provided potential ideas to pursue in relation to measure 323 and measure 331 which should prove useful; and
- Investigate the potential of working with Local Authority, Forestry Commission and Natural England to get evidence base for rural skills support.

4. Further information:

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