



Wednesday 9th December 2009

National Farmers Union
Agriculture House
Willie Snaith Road, Newmarket
Suffolk CB8 7SN

East of England Rural Forum

“Rural Economy”

Minutes

Attendees

Anne Marie Hamilton	Debbie Ollett	Kate Sayer
Brian Hayes	Ed Bennett	Martin Collison
Celia Hodson	Edwin Jones	Michael Hand
Charles Taylor	Fran Bedding	Michael Veasey
Chris Knock	Glenn Athey	Nicola Lloyd
Cindy Winn	Jasmine Joolia	Pat Holtom
Cllr John Gilli-Ross	Jenny Lewsey	Peter Martin
Cllr John Goodwin	Jim Gledhill	Philip Hayes
Cllr Judith Watson	John Atherton	Philip Wilson
Cllr Mick Page	John Barker	Rachel Carrington
Cllr Stuart Pile	John Carrick	Richard Woolley
David Wood	Karen Staples	Suzanne Harris

Apologies

Caron Britton	John Simmons	Mike Furness
Cheryl Rose	John Yates	Mike Seville
Cllr Hazel Williams	Kate Belinis	Nick Phillips
David Burch	Kirsten Bennett	Peter Medhurst
Ed Gregory	Mags Lambert	Phil Bennett-Lloyd
Greg Luton	Marie Francis	
John Buchanan	Mick Carr	

Speakers

Dr Glenn Athey - Insight East	East of England Regional Economy, the headline statistics
Peter Martin - Fed Small Businesses	The state of small rural businesses, challenges and successes
Jenny Lewsey - Maldon District Council	The Economy of Market Towns
Cindy Winn & Chris Knock EEDA	RDPE – Support for the rural economy

1. Welcome

Suzanne Harris, Vice Chair chaired the meeting and welcomed the members to Newmarket. She informed the meeting that John Yates was poorly, had been ordered to rest and that he is unlikely to participate in EERF activities for the rest of this fiscal year.

2. Matters arising from meeting 16th Sept

Meeting approved the minutes as a true and accurate record of the last meeting.

The main priority at the moment is the regional, rural white paper and Pat Holtom reported

progress to members. An Invitation To Tender (ITT) had been issued for appointment of a contractor to write the paper and the Working Group will be selecting the best tender this afternoon. Pat thanked EEDA for the funding contribution which had enabled the work to proceed. The desire was to complete the work this fiscal year and possibly launch it at the 2009 EERF conference.

3. News and Reports

The network of regional RAF Chairs met with Dan Norris, the rural minister, on 3rd December and Pat attended in John's absence. Also present were Stuart Burgess, Rural Advocate from CRC, Defra and CRC officers. The minister highlighted that he wanted a picture of the key issues for each region, not just identification of problems, but also ideas to solve them. He would like this information collated into a single document and David Wood, as secretary for the network, would do this. Topics discussed included:

- Broadband and mobile telephone availability and quality
- Planning system
- Affordable Housing
- Climate Change
- Regulations, especially for small businesses and farmers

The next meeting of the forum chairs will on 17th February 2010.

Defra announced that a short review of the role, function and composition of RAFs was about to start and would report in March 2010. Defra stressed that the review was not a cost cutting exercise but intended to evaluate efficiency and outputs of RAFs. The review is a very small part of a wide ranging review across all government departments. The results would inform the plans of the new government. All RAF members across the country would be consulted via a questionnaire.

4. East of England Rural Forum Sub Groups.

The Housing Subgroup – apologies from Graham Hedger, no report submitted.

The Learning and Skills Subgroup - update from Chairman, Martin Collison. The subgroup is currently looking into the newly released Train To Gain report and on behalf of the EERF will report back on its take-up and benefit to rural businesses. The Subgroup plan to discuss and feed into the planned EERF rural white paper.

John Barker thanked Martin for his presentation at the Annual Conference of Suffolk Association of Local Councils (SALC) and would like it to be recorded for the record that his talk was well received.

5. PRESENTATIONS

Copies of all slides are available on EERF web site, www.eerf.org.uk.

5.1 Glenn Athey, Insight East: EE Regional Economy – The Headline Statistics

Glenn presented on the headline statistics for the region demonstrating how Insight East is working to:

- Make their work accessible with headlines and key messages
- Offer economic research to support regional leadership, including ministerial briefings
- Publish regular briefings on the website
- Publish quarterly rural report

See website – www.insighteast.org.uk

Current economic headlines were:

- Approx 50,000 jobs lost in region
- Agriculture benefited from weak pound sterling
- Although rural economy was similar to urban, lower job density and diversity made it harder to find new jobs if made redundant
- Unemployment was almost equally distributed between rural (55%) and Urban (45%)

5.2 Peter Martin, EE Federation of Small Businesses: The state of small rural businesses - challenges and successes

Peter presented mainly on the two themes of Broadband and Banking but touched on tourism, transport, planning system and government policy. The main points of his presentation were:

- Recession forces action, so if you do nothing you will fail. However, if you react and adapt to market circumstances, you will survive.
- Not all businesses which go into administration are bad businesses
- Be aware of skewed statistics where urban density or isolated rural affluence raises the averages for all.
- Join campaign for better broadband services via EREBUS, www.erebusonline.org.uk. Your requests should focus on essential uses like business and education and the need for greater than 2Mbit/s and preferably 10Mbit/s.

See website - <http://www.fsb.org.uk>

5.3 Jenny Lewsey – Economic Development Officer for Maldon DC: The Economy of Market Towns

Jenny described Maldon District, a large rural area with significant coastal areas and its market town. There were poor skill levels and a high dependence on tourism, £140M and ~2,500 jobs. She gave a first hand presentation on what Maldon is doing to maintain traditional jobs such as sail rigging; improve existing businesses with training; develop new businesses; and some innovative ways it is promoting itself through the recession.

See website - www.maldon.gov.uk.

5.4 Cindy Winn and Chris Knock, EEDA: RDPE – Support for the rural economy

Cindy Winn set the scene and context of the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE), which aims to support rural economy and communities and fill gaps in other funding programmes in support of rural.

Chris Knock, RDPE manager, described examples of projects supported by RDPE, such as Woburn Country Foods meat cutting facility next to existing abattoir as part of support to livestock production, grazing and meat processing; Wood Fuels East for wood chip production for renewable energy; Landskills East to provide a wide range of training at all levels on both rural specific and general management topics; increases to water reservoirs; and Local Action Groups (LAGs). EEDA was looking to make the application process simpler and more appropriate for smaller projects and also to increase support for community projects and diversification.

See website - www.eeda.org.uk/rdpe.asp.

6. Discussion and Key Points

The speakers were joined by Fran Bedding, External Funding Manager, Suffolk CC to form a panel to respond to questions from members.

Questions, Comments and Responses

A. Philip Hays – We have heard a lot about broadband and broadband speeds today, how can we actually tell the speed of our own connection?
Peter Martin – Google “*broadband speed check*” and use one of the many checkers available. Remember to check at different times of the day.

B. Richard Woolley - Can you tell the nature of recovery yet? Are we in a V, a U or a W? Also will recovery show a geographical variation?
Glenn Athey – It is all a prediction but we should see some growth soon although initially, we may well see a flattening out or even slight contraction over Q1 next year. It is very difficult to predict the shape of recovery at this time.

Geographical variations are very likely. Also the size of a business is important. Small businesses are more flexible and able to react to change; family owned small businesses may have already been through recessions and have a loyal customer base. One big issue on the horizon which is causing uncertainty is the upcoming election and what that will mean in respect of policy, VAT, etc.

C. Ed Bennett – From personal experience, he disagreed with the statement in Dr Glenn Athey’s presentation that agri-sales are benefiting from the higher cost of imports and that home grown is in high demand. Many farmers in his area of Essex are making huge losses and selling the final products below cost. He feels agri-sales are at their weakest for a long time.

D. Ed went on to ask if Axis 3 is only available to projects through a LAG, why are LAGs located where they are and not covering some of the most deprived rural areas?
Cindy Winn advised that you do not have to work through a LAG to gain access to Axis 3 funding. She recommended contacting a RDPE manager to discuss project ideas. On the second point, Cindy made clear that EEDA was constrained by the process set out by the EU and that LAG assignment was a competitive process and EEDA could only support groups based on proposals judged against prescribed criteria.

E. Edwin Jones – Asked Glenn Athey if there a way for Insight East to identify data for food production and processing? Specifically information to support planning for the industry.
Glenn advised there is lots of data available but what was the precise question and what detail is required and how is it to be used. The more specific a question, the better analysis that could be done. He reiterated that the website has much information on it and he is happy to discuss requests for specific information.

F. John Carrick – Wanted to make the point that in his experience cereal, milk and potatoes are all produced at no profit in this country and that if farmers want to sell their own goods (at a better price direct) they could learn a lot from the customer experience given by the big super markets. Customers are becoming more and more careful where they are spending and that they want quality, perceived value and customer service and that customer service is key to gaining repeat orders. To enable farmers to do this, he wants to see greater focus on retraining in these softer skills and that the recession provides an opportunity to move forward.

G. David Wood asked the panel about diversification and the rural economy and, given the Matthew Taylor report, how can the planning system support and encourage sustainable rural development and more importantly, what is being done to stop it acting as a barrier to rural development?
Jenny Lewsey urged individuals to talk closely to planners and work with East of England

Tourism to try to fit in to rules. However she does agree that planning is rigid.

Fran Bedding advised that close consultation with the planners is key and it is really useful to engage the help of a third party, such as an economic development officer to act as a neutral party. From experience, she advised that planning guidance is open to some flexibility but this is sometimes forgotten.

Glenn Athey advised that there is a regional compendium of sites that are located in favourable planning areas and are being promoted for development.

Peter Martin has come across situations where developers have been misled by planners or there has been lack of understanding of sustainable rural development. He also suggested that if planning is rejected, to ensure you request constructive reasons as to why.

Cindy Winn commented that sustainable development and particularly the development of redundant buildings has been covered in the Sustainable Farming and Food Group Vision for 2012 and is being taken forward in the Regional Spatial Strategy.

David Wood commented that this issue is a problem across the country and has been raised by regional RAF Chairs with the minister.

Chris Knock said that in his experience, planners like to have an early informal chat and then be given a robust business plan and to see community consultation and support of the development as this will go in the applicant's favour.

- H. Cllr John Gilli-Ross - There has been much said about broadband and the speeds which are available in rural areas. He supports Peter's recommendation that if you are not receiving what was advertised by the internet providers you need to complain but wants to know to whom? Peter advised that an individual complaining has no power on their own but if there are enough complaints something will get done. He says to complain to OFCOM that you have been mis-sold and ensure you have checked speeds at different times of the day. You can complain to your internet provider for the customer service received and to BT for line quality. There is the issue of 'the last mile' especially for rural areas but if enough people highlight the issue more will be done. Also promote the EREBUS Scheme to register broadband demand.

Martin Collison added that we have to address broadband. However, we need to be careful around the language used because the requirement is the speed and quality of service not just access! For solutions, we need to look at wireless systems, as most rural areas will not get fibre and look at community benefits through collaboration with schools and local businesses.

- I. Ed Bennett would like to see a lobby group put together to highlight and promote the viability of villages. He would like local authorities to highlight areas of '*employment land*'. If you can get businesses to come in, then you can encourage provision of high speed internet and negotiate for household internet access as well. With thriving businesses, more housing will be sustainable and with high speed broadband, more people will be able to work from home or start home based businesses. Finally, Ed called for review of PPS6 and 7 and better LDF to support rural development.
- J. Phillip Wilson commented that EREBUS looks to be a great idea and that it seems we are on the cusp of a change of mindset to what makes rural development sustainable. In Essex, they have decided that provision of broadband is so important that they are helping delivery by providing a fund to serve Maldon as a pilot and if successful, will roll this out across other areas of the county.
- K. Peter Martin agrees that there are different solutions for different areas but wants to back up Martin Collison's comments that speed and 'future proofing' is important so would like to see fibre provision to ensure future requirements are covered. He also wants to see efforts

coordinated so that once a scheme is set up, it is sustainable and will not be 'mopped up' by a big incoming provider.

- L. Cindy Winn advised that EEDA is looking into 'Next Generation broadband' and what is the role of the local authority and when should it intervene? EEDA is looking at possible funding through the EU recovery fund but this is an ongoing piece of work.
- M. Fran Bedding reported that in 'Speed Up Suffolk', they are currently piloting 3 different ways of provision to assess viability
- N. Anne-Marie Hamilton asked whether the RDPE application process could be simplified for small grants? She knows many in farming communities who have a small germ of an idea but are unable to develop it without support. Also the forms are daunting and put off many people. Is there a list of people who could help put together an application?
Chris Knock advised there is no list of 'support people' other than the EEDA RDPE managers. There had been a focus on larger projects for bigger gain. However, EEDA was looking to support smaller grants. It would need to change the process to enable this and is something it will be trialling over the winter. Facilitation support is limited; however EEDA may be able to train/update other existing support networks to include RDPE advice.

Each of the LAGs in the region has a facilitator to advise and help with small grants to be delivered under the LEADER methodology. Details are on the relevant websites.

Cindy Winn suggests contacting Business Link if you have any embryonic business idea and it will help its development.

Martin Collison advised that the process has already changed a little and applicants can put in a proposal for feedback without having to produce a full business plan initially.

7. Close

Suzanne Harris called an end to the session. She thanked all the presenters for their time, information and contribution to morning. She thanked the Panel and the forum members for their active contributions, enabling the forum to have such an informative discussion.

8. Date of Next Meeting

Next EERF meeting will be on **3rd of March 2010** and the topic will be 'Rural Development'. (Venue TBA). Our AGM will also be held during this meeting.

Our annual conference will be held on **Tuesday 20 April 2010** (venue TBA).

David Wood
Secretary