



Modernising the Rural Economy

**Report from the East of England Rural Forum Conference held at
Chilford Hall on Thursday 1st March 2007**

Introduction

The “Modernising the Rural Economy” conference took place on 1st March 2007 at Chilford Hall, Linton, Cambridge. The conference featured presentations from:

Dr Stuart Burgess, the Rural Advocate;
Jason Borthwick, Earthly Ideas;
Tim Heaps, Blythweb Ltd.;
Angela Francis, EEDA; and
Helen Chalmers, CAG Consultants.

Their presentations covered making sustainable choices; experiences of running a rural business; and the review process for the Regional Economic Strategy.

More than 40 delegates gathered at the conference, which was hosted by the East of England Rural Forum. The purpose of the event was to gather the views of those present to inform the Rural Forum’s input to the review of the Regional Economic Strategy.

Notes from the presentations:

Dr Stuart Burgess, Rural Advocate

Stuart spoke about the change in society, with rural and urban areas being closely interdependent in this country. The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) welcomes the Forum encouraging rural people to input to the review of the Regional Economic Strategy (RES). It also welcomed the Forum’s input to the CRC’s pre-budget report.

The CRC is keen for the Government to commit to ‘rural’ and Stuart reported that there is a commitment to engaging with underperforming rural areas.

The Government’s response to the Barker Review, the Lyons Review, the Leitch Review and the Stern Review will have implications for rural communities. It is important to focus on the opportunities afforded by these Reviews.

The ‘City Regions’ agenda is a challenging one for rural areas, although ‘rural’ is neither separate nor an afterthought. There is a clear relationship between market towns and their rural hinterlands and the contributions that they make to regional economies.

The farming industry and migrant workers are of great importance to rural areas. There is evidence of rural areas adapting to changing economics, although some areas are unable to adapt quickly. In order to have dynamic communities, there must be dynamic economies.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has accepted an invitation to accompany Stuart on a Rural Advocate visit.

Jason Borthwick, Earthly Ideas

Jason farms on the north Norfolk coast and has diversified his business to include tourist information, accommodation and a retail site. His company, 'Earthly Ideas', provides advice to others that are looking to diversify their businesses.

His aspiration is to challenge society's leaders to make it easier for people to support sustainable development. He believes that, in order to change attitudes and to encourage the public to go 'green' and play their part in tackling carbon emissions, the Government should legislate to remove the choice between sustainable and non-sustainable products.

The environmental benefits and economic savings afforded by eco-homes and a greener lifestyle should be highlighted to the public. Tax incentives would also encourage people to build renewable sources of energy into their homes.

Tim Heaps, Blythweb Ltd.

Tim Heaps started up Blythweb Ltd in later life, having previously worked in the Civil Service and as a bus and coach driver.

Blythweb Ltd provides websites for communities in the Blyth Valley area of Suffolk and has approximately 300 clients.

Tim outlined the pleasures and pitfalls of running a rural business, as follows:

Pleasures:

- Independence
- Helping people in businesses to do what they want
- Getting out and about
- Contributing to the community
- Working with people who value their surroundings

Pitfalls:

- Poor infrastructure and communications i.e. poor broadband due to the distance from the exchange; limited mobile phone reception
- Limited transport options
- Power cuts in bad weather
- Remote from policy makers; problems created by being on the border of two local authorities
- Flood risks

Both Tim Heaps and Jason Borthwick agree that skills shortages are a problem, with the lack of good quality training being a particular issue.

Angela Francis, EEDA

Angela outlined the process for the RES Review, including the key milestones and opportunities for consultation. The Government requires the RES to be reviewed every three years and the review of the East of England RES is due for completion in March 2008.

The eight draft goals within the RES are centred around a prosperous and sustainable region and are not purely looking at the economic benefits.

Helen Chalmers, CAG Consultants

Helen explained that the Government requires Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) to undertake Sustainability Appraisals. The Appraisals examine the way in which RDAs, their partners and the RES support sustainable development.

The RES will be assessed against the sustainable development criteria from the Toolkit for the East of England.

Following the Sustainability Appraisal, CAG Consultants will produce a report, which will then go out for consultation.

Workshop Sessions: Exploring RES Themes and Goals

The workshop session explored the eight draft goals from the RES, with a particular focus on the rural perspective. Delegates were asked to consider the following three questions:

1. What is driving change in rural areas and communities in relation to each RES goal?
2. What are the key issues for rural areas and communities in the East of England in relation to each RES goal?
3. Which issue(s) do you consider regionally significant and the most important for the region?

The output from the workshop sessions can be found at Annex 1.

Annex 1: Outputs from the Workshop Sessions

Delegates were asked to consider three questions, as follows:

1. What is driving change in rural areas and communities in relation to each RES goal?
2. What are the key issues for rural areas and communities in the East of England in relation to each RES goal?
3. Which issue(s) do you consider regionally significant and the most important for the region?

Goal 1: Improving skills

- Apathy and lack of motivation are issues that need to be addressed – unless these are tackled, it doesn't matter what training is provided
- Access to, cost of and responsibility for transport
- Range and diversity of skills for local need
- Vocational training in schools
- Better training for advisers i.e. Connexions, Jobcentre Plus
- Lack of face-to-face advice for business start-ups

Goal 2: Increasing productivity

- It isn't necessary for SMEs to be based solely in urban areas. SMEs need support to grow in terms of:
 - Space
 - ICT
 - Planning system
- There should be a general aim to have 'live, work and play' all in the same place
- The region should concentrate on encouraging high GVA jobs
- It is important to match planned housing growth with jobs growth, so a supportive planning system needs to evolve

Goal 3: Commercialising ideas

- Need to recognise the interconnectivity between the eight goals

- Most rural businesses are perceived to be small, with little desire to expand or innovate
- Larger employers are perceived to be more aware of threats and opportunities to expand. Innovative and revolutionary ideas often come from the knowledge sector, which includes the region's universities and agricultural colleges
- Competition creates an atmosphere where businesses want to and are able to grow
- An image of the region as an innovative 'Space for Ideas' can support business and sustainable economic development.
- Commercialising ideas might cause displacement
- There are a lot of ideas from the knowledge-based sector in this region, but not much recognition of business need within this
- There is a good knowledge network within this region i.e. universities, agricultural colleges, John Innes Centre etc
- Lack of capital / venture capital
- Remoteness
- Address skills deficiency and upskilling local people

Goal 4: Living sustainably

- Limiting planning policy
- Affordable quality homes
- Services / infrastructure
- Matching skills to economic needs – more vocational skills
- IT needs
- Creation of flexible employment practices is crucial

Goal 5: Participating in the economy

- Demographic change: most of the workforce will be over 45 by 2030. There will be opportunities created by this experienced workforce. More focussed delivery of training to older people will be needed

- Migrant workers face a whole range of social inclusion and participation issues. Local authorities may learn from the Fens Pathfinder work done by Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Lincolnshire County Councils
- Caring responsibilities and rise in age-related illness associated with ageing population
- Many social issues in rural areas will be the same as those in urban areas. The solutions proposed by public sector providers may need to be different
- Adequate childcare can aid the return of young people to the working population and support the benefits to them
- Limited public transport in rural areas causes consequential limitations to economic participation of those who don't have access to private transport. Notwithstanding that, car use needs to be recognised as essential to rural economic output. Policies designed to limit car use are easier to apply in city/urban areas where there is high population density and a critical mass for public transport options. They are less appropriate for rural circumstances.
- When housing becomes unaffordable, it limits participation in the local economy of younger workers. Their subsequent out-migration has repercussions for the demographic profile of rural areas.
- Second homes. Perhaps the planning system can make second-home ownership, especially those that stand empty for the majority of the year, less attractive.
- Multi-purpose village centres could be a potential solution that would also bring the community together
- Wheels to Work schemes can break the 'no transport = no training = no job = no money = no transport' vicious cycle

Goal 6: Moving sustainably

- Tourism is of major significance to the region's economy. Changes to the amount and type of tourism and affluence of visitors to the region should be planned for
- Food production and distribution are contributors to the production of environmental 'bads'. The complexity of 'food miles' as an issue suggests it's an inappropriate indicator of sustainability
- There is potential for production of biofuels for transport

- The car is essential for rural transport, as there is a lack of choice in public transport. Sustainable solutions need to be explored, such as local park and ride sites
- Rising fuel prices could be an issue for transport in rural areas

Goal 7: Exploiting information

- Changing rural businesses and the potential from the rural economy – by 2030, more businesses will be working from 'home' although human interaction should not be lost. 'Enterprise villages' in disused farmyards could help to build communities
- Local generation of power could be facilitated by new legislation
- The region is becoming more cosmopolitan

Goal 8: Managing natural resources

- The eight goals may need to be modified to accommodate climate change
- There needs to be more joined-up thinking and more information for people regarding what will happen in their area
- There will be issues for food production, migration and in-migration from other countries because of climate change
- Better use of local food resources and better labelling of the origin of food is needed
- Zero-carbon building
- Look at GM and nuclear as possible solutions, however there is currently little trust from the public in the testing of these technologies

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