

Rural Issues from the East of England

The following are issues that have been identified by the members of the East of England Rural Forum and of their constituents that they represent. They are intended to support your ideas for future research through the latter part of the year and also to provide you with some new areas that through which we as a Forum will be able to support and engage with.

Integrated Agricultural research

- More integrated research is required to support the farming sector – as opposed to research that is covering only single issues.
- Sustainability research needs to address productivity as well as environmental and social impact.

As this research would be in line with LEAF's goals they believe that they could help with the dissemination of research

Food sustainability

This remains an important issue in this country. We believe that as a consequence of losing many highly skilled workers with the knowledge of how to produce good quality food, from the agricultural and horticultural workforce the future of food production is potentially unsustainable.

It is already becoming a very serious problem and farmers cannot replace people with the right type of staff when their current employees retire.

In today's world, farm staff need to be highly motivated, very 'legally aware', highly trained and extremely versatile. It is almost impossible to attract this type of person into a primary industry because of the artificially low prices on offer for basic food commodities due to the 'cheap food' policies of governments of all hues. The mantra of 'added value' is not relevant in many cases!

Further research into the issues surrounding food security and its long term sustainability would help support the industry.

Employment and Access to Education

Further research would be beneficial to look at the possibility of providing a balance on the reliance of many of those in the agricultural sectors who rely on immigrant workers and now find themselves without seasonal staff for harvesting etc.

There are excellent examples of agricultural colleges, for example Easton and Otley, who offer excellent training for all countryside careers. However, for 16 to 18 year olds who have just left school the location of both establishments create a prohibitive obstacle to many who do not have transport. As an example the day release level 2 Game-keeping course for any apprentice cannot be accessed due to the cost and distance involved.

We would support further research into the possibilities and opportunities of bringing the education to the students in more remote rural areas or to localise courses in satellite venues around the counties.

Local/Green Energy

- Clarify the social, economic and environmental benefits of producing green energy at a local level.
- Identify main opportunities for local energy production and assess practicality and application.
- Identify main barriers to development of such initiatives and offer solutions / recommendations.

Evidence collection could be via survey of relevant landowner activity – current and planned.

Economic strengths and requirements Rural Businesses

- Does the provision of 'local' (village based) employment really attract local people or just creates a complicated network of journeys to work from other villages and towns? Do long established businesses have a different commuting profile as compared to new ones?
- What is the rural dimension for young women (or men!) with childcare responsibilities? Social isolation; access to family/friends; access to health facilities; access to retail outlets etc. What additional support might be put in place?
- Additional to the generic business support services offered by Business Link and others, what practical support do market town independent retailers need in order to reclaim the High Streets, taking advantage (if it is possible) of the economic downturn and the closure of some of the 'chains'.
- What is the impact that small businesses have on their rural communities? -What are their needs re business advice and delivery of that to businesses that might well be one-man and need some innovative delivery mechanisms targeted specifically at these difficult to reach groups - this also applies to rural businesses who wish to expand their employment profile. In Norfolk for example there are many very rural, highly skilled professional businesses alongside those of one man window cleaners/car mechanics, etc. There is little evidence of research to demonstrate their contribution to the rural economy and potential rural employment opportunities.

Current financial crisis

- How supportive are 'financial houses' to employers with less than 5 employees?
- If people are made redundant – how can communities best use their skills and how can redundant people make best use of their available time whilst job hunting? There are direct links here with the demographics of the voluntary sector.

Transport

- Further research is needed into the cost of transport and its accessibility against use for both young and old.

Affordable rural housing

- Parishes are concerned particularly about this issue as well as IT initiatives on a regional basis.
- Apart from the new house build issue research into the rental availability for lower paid rural workers would help employment issues. While most housing schemes now require a social housing consideration these may often be a distance from the likely location of employment adding to the difficulty for employers to find staff.

Social care

- Should also include elder care

Visual Landscape Character Assessments

It is considered of high importance to undertake complete visual landscape character assessments in the varied Growth Areas (i.e. current Landscape Typology data is wholly insufficient) to ensure that quality land for farming, biodiversity and recreation is retained and housing and other development is properly integrated. Failure to do so could also have other implications such as sustainability issues and well being of local people for current and future generations.

To complement these typologies what is needed is an overlay of agricultural soil types such as Best and Most Versatile land and possibly types of agriculture/horticulture but of course this depends on other circumstances such as market conditions. Further to this it would be helpful to have clear policy/strategy of protection for BMV agricultural land following on from the food security item. The UK Gov idea of food security is to ensure security of supply which is not necessarily from the UK.