
SUSTAINABLE FARMING AND FOOD INDUSTRY GROUP

**NFU, Agriculture House, Newmarket
08.00 Friday 18 July 2008**

Attendees:

Marie Francis (Chair)
Pam Forbes
Mick Carr
Ian Pigott
Clarke Willis

Noel Bartram
Nicky Currie
Mike Appleyard
Martin Collison
Lawrence Mallinson

Apologies:

William Martin
Gary Stokes

William Burgess

Minutes

1. Welcome & Minutes of the Last Meeting

Marie welcomed everyone. The minutes were agreed.

2. Access to Skills Funding

Mike Appleyard gave an overview of the work of Lantra and the Sector Skills Councils, specifically taking in recent initiatives. Noel Bartram stated that the main issue was getting people into the industry. Ian Pigott agreed, and said that farming was not seen as a career option in schools. It was agreed that there was a need to market the sector more positively throughout the supply chain, and forge better links with Improve (SSC for food and drink) to cover the whole chain.

Martin Collison gave an update of the RDPE skills programme worth £4.5m over the next 3 years, 25% going into vocational skills, 75% into higher level skills and knowledge transfer. Tenders are due out very soon.

There was agreement that there was a need for simplicity in skills provision for businesses to access, and better publicity for what is on offer.

Action

Industry Group members will be notified when the contracts have been let. Any nominations for membership of the Steering Group to be notified to Martin Collison.

3. Update on “Growing our Future” paper and November Conference

Marie explained the background to the paper, which will be circulated widely when complete. The contents will be used to inform the Conference to be held on 13th November. Marie gave an overview of the conference as planned, and a discussion was held about possible audience and speakers.

Ian Pigott said it was imperative to get the R&D focus back to production, as Rothamsted currently have no production related research on their books.

Pam Forbes requested that the section on influencing should reflect the good work carried out by NFU and CLA over the years. Marie agreed and explained that the meaning of the section was to provide a single regional voice for the first time across all partners and stakeholders.

4. Farming for the Future

Mick Carr gave an update of the latest position regarding Defra’s SFFS refresh document “Farming for the Future” which is currently being redrafted and will include more production related priorities than originally planned. This weeks publication of the discussion paper “Ensuring the UK’s Food Security in a Changing World” indicates that Defra are moving towards a more balanced approach in their food policy.

5. Action Plan

Marie went through the main points of the refreshed SFFS action plan, explaining the changes that will be made. Some specific points were raised and will be taken on board in the finished version.

Action Any further points to be referred to Mick Carr.

6. AOB

Martin gave an update on work being done by EEDA and SEEDA to help London to deliver its Food Strategy, particularly a trade event for producers from both regions at New Covent Garden market on 1 October.

He also announced that funding for a Non Food Crops project had been approved by EEDA, which will network research institutions and universities working in non food crops with a view to commercialising existing research.

Next scheduled meeting has been cancelled as the conference will be close. Members of the group will receive an invitation to dinner with Sir Don Curry on 12th November, as well as to the conference the following day.

Mick Carr
GO-East
21 July 2008

2008 - Action Plan Priorities for Agricultural, Food and Drink Industries in the East of England

As identified by the Sustainable Food and Farming Industry Group

The group looked at the 2006 Action Plan (arising from the Sustainable Food and Farming Strategy and the EEDA Food and Drink Delivery Plan). They gave their view from an industry point of view on the existing action plan and identified new areas they felt required attention when looking at future projects and funding.

Response to 2006 Action Plan Priorities

1. Food Parks

The development of food parks and distribution centres to increase the production and marketing opportunities for regional food, with particular emphasis on supplying the food service market in London covering both the profit and cost sectors.

There was disagreement amongst the Industry Group as to whether using Government money to create new food hubs was the most effective use of resources. However, all agreed if supported:

- they should be run by the commercial sector (not the public sector) funding should be used for start up and pump priming costs of the project, such as business and feasibility planning.

A food hub should:

- act as a one-stop-shop for regional food
- incorporate a main commercial player
- have central facilitation for smaller businesses
- be based on distribution networks
- identify a recognised market before set-up

The aspiration is to engage larger, commercial businesses to drive it forward, and with smaller businesses using it as a means to open up new avenues to markets not easily accessed. These include local food into food service, supermarkets, public sector and London markets.

Action

Marie agreed to raise food hubs at the SFF Regional Chairs meeting on 16th January, and enquire as to what has happened to food hubs in other regions.

2. Business Support Services

The provision of a comprehensive business support service that specifically meets the needs of agricultural, food and drink businesses.

There was a lack of communication about training and funding available in a form that businesses could easily relate to.

Businesses would like:

- to be involved before new initiatives are implemented and have the opportunity to influence ministers at an early stage
- Have flexibility to access training that is tailor made for their work force.
- Joined up thinking across businesses and the public sector to ensure training availability keeps pace with changing business needs
- More training and upskilling of migrant labour on which much of the food industry is dependent.

Action

Marie to discuss with Implementation Group Business Link and LANTRA members how to best communicate messages and information to the industry as to the range of resources, grants and services that are available. This should include making more use of established 'routes to market' such as the NFU, CLA, FCBs and others who have regular dialogue with large numbers of businesses.

Marie and Martin to talk to the sector skills councils LANTRA & IMPROVE to investigate how business can have engagement at an earlier stage, when policy and training priorities are being decided.

Martin to work with Business Link to provide information for NFU and CLA and other industry outlets on Train to Gain and the £1000 leadership funding for inclusion in member communications.

Clarke to follow up with the machinery rings to establish if they wish to investigate putting in a bid under the RDPE to develop a specific training programme to meet their needs.

3. Sustainable Supply Chains

a) Development of an action plan for the sugar industry in the East of England

Discussions were held around the need for efficient logistics networks, and improved transport planning to ensure more effective use of lorries supplying the factories.

Action

William Martin to consult with the sugar industry and feed back if there are specific areas not covered where help is required in generating change.

Confirmation is needed on whether there is a strong need to facilitate further dissemination of the information from the supply chain work carried out in 2007.

Feedback is required on whether there is a need for an independent study on transport logistics to inform a potential change in practices.

b) Economic and environmental integration of the red meat supply chain.

It was felt that this work had not progressed in terms of developing an environmental, value added product. Work was being carried out in the undergrazing agenda but it was not clear that results were being achieved.

There was a need to better understand the problem. Maybe paying for environmental gain is the way to keep livestock in certain areas and developing a value added end product is not realistic.

Action

Discuss the issue with the undergrazing project and EBLEX.

Make contact with the deer initiative taking venison to market. Do they require support?

c) Promoting sustainability in supply chains with emphasis on energy, water and waste.

It was agreed that increased efficiency is high on all agendas, both commercial and Government, and that work in these three areas is of high priority.

There is a continuing need to make the case for water requirement within the sector, particularly as significant increases in housing stock in the region will put pressure on supplies.

4. Export and International Trade

To provide active support to increase export and international trade opportunities for the agricultural, food and drink industries in the region.

It was felt that increasing free trade means the UK is under pressure from imports. It was considered important that businesses make the most of exporting opportunities if they are to continue to develop.

It was agreed that the region main area of growth in exports was principally around exporting specialist or added value products. It was proposed that this aspect of the Action Plan be amended to read "export of specialist regional products".

There was also value seen in support through subsidised Trade Fairs.

5. Non Food Uses of Crops

To develop the potential for non-food uses of crops including production, processing and marketing.

Unassigned Projects

Some work was carried out in 2006/7 that was not identified in the original action plan. The Industry Group gave their view on whether they felt these areas should be incorporated in the updated action plan.

1. Carbon accounting

The practice of Carbon Accounting was one that was expected to be of increasing importance for businesses. Particular emphasis was put on communication and training for business.

A plea was almost made that the industry needs a single, robust and straightforward carbon accounting methodology to be adopted, to avoid the problems of claim and counter claims when multiple systems are used.

Action

Incorporate in the Action Plan

Investigate ways of providing business support in this area.

2. Developing new products and markets for food.

The strong R&D base in the region, particularly in the food industry, was not being exploited by regional businesses. Food processing Faraday was identified as having the potential to be better used in the region to identify R&D available to businesses.

Action

Put a selection of businesses in contact with Faraday to see if it can help them access useful sources of research information not traditionally being used.

New Areas for Attention

The Industry Group identified the following additional key areas that need attention or should be added to the revised Action Plan.

1. Sustainable Supply Chains – The Fresh Produce Sector

Labour and skills were identified as the areas where the fresh produce production is most vulnerable. Migrant labour is seen as key, so consideration must be given on issues around education, housing and infrastructure issues.

There was concern that there will not automatically be a ready source of new migrant labour available in the future, and we must therefore look to develop the full potential of those who are here now and develop long term careers for them.

Action

Add the Fresh Produce Sector to the Action Plan.

Work with William Burgess to further identify the issues around migrant labour and to identify what actions may be appropriate to tackle them.

Link to the regional migrant workers group to make sure that the industry's views are fed into this process.

2. R&D

In many small businesses, R&D investment is not something that can be realistically explored, but there would be value in the Government providing opportunities to allow businesses to undertake research.

However, as identified in Business Support Services there is a need to ensure businesses are aware of what resource is already available.

Tax incentives for businesses that invest in R&D are necessary to try and fill some of the gap left by the withdrawal of much government funded research.

Action

To raise tax incentives for R&D investment by small businesses at a national level.

To ensure that in increasing its engagement with the food and drink sector Businesslink pushes the support available for R&D.

3. Sustainable Development and livestock

There is a critical issue developing about the lack of animal feed in the country. The industry group felt it is time to address the issue of GM feed as:

- Non gm feed is running at such a premium it is pricing regional (UK and EU) livestock producers out of markets and must be addressed as a matter of urgency at UK and EU levels
- Imports of meat are coming in to the country based on animals and poultry that have been fed with GM feed which is banned in the EU – we risk exporting our livestock sector to other parts of the World which often have lower welfare standards as a result of this.
- There is not enough non-GM feed to meet requirements and the problem is getting worse as more countries adopt GM technology.

Action

Initiate national debate on GM and the role it has to play in the industry.

4. Sustainable Development and energy, waste and water

Various ideas were proposed:

- Tax incentives for early adopters of energy, water or waste efficient processes. These would help incentivise capital investment and lead to faster take-up of new technology within the industry.
- Energy suppliers need to be required to produce up to date bills to enable users to better monitor energy use. Many examples of bills a year behind and estimated bills were noted, which did not help energy efficient processes to be implemented. Particular problems occurred with the move between energy suppliers, which is increasingly common.
- Unless businesses can measure energy use regularly they cannot be expected to make savings.
- Business would like to be told to read meters themselves so that bills were correct (with spot checks to ensure some businesses did not cheat). However, it was noted that this may need training and on larger sites we really need to be monitoring at the building/equipment level rather than business supply level. More promotion of smart meters may help, but there is a significant cost involved.

Action

Work with NFU and CLA tax departments to see if a tax incentive proposal could be developed.

Work with other industries and EEDA to approach energy suppliers and the Government about the need for more relevant and upto date billing on the grounds that if you don't measure you can't control energy costs and CO2.

5. Olympics

There is a need to ensure that food and farming in the region engages with the opportunities presented by the Olympics.

Action

Add to the Action Plan