

**South East Rural Board
The County Club, Guildford
Friday 14th November 2008: 10:00 – 14:00**

Minutes of Meeting

Attendees:

Paul Bettison – Chair

Board Members

Alan Betts – Forestry Commission

Harvey Bradshaw – Environment Agency

Andy Brown – English Heritage

Geoff Butler – Businessman

Poul Christensen- SEEDA

Pam Doodes – representing District Councils

Raymond Ellis – representing County Councils

Ian Hepburn (on behalf of Chris Corrigan) – the Assembly

Alan Law – Natural England

Shaun Leavey – Sustainable Food and Farming

Jeremy Leggett – Rural Community Council Network

Working Group Members:

Julie Price (also GOSE Observer on the Board)

Gill Cameron- Waller – Wealden District Council

Valerie Carter - SEEDA

Chris Edwards- Natural England

Oona Muirhead - SEEDA

Nick Woolfenden (on behalf of Cath Stubbings) – the Assembly

Annie Robertson – note taker

Apologies:

Chris Corrigan – Board member from the Assembly (but represented by Ian Hepburn)

Jacinta Thorley and Cath Stubbings – both members of the Working Group, though Cath Stubbings represented by Nick Woolfenden

Apologies were also given for the errors in Paul Bettison's biography. A corrected version had already been sent round to all.

Welcome & Introductions

1. Poul Bettison welcomed all Board Members.
2. Each Board Member introduced themselves and gave a brief outline of their role and what they expected to gain from being a member of the Rural Board. Their response identified the following expectations:
 - Want to identify how the Board will make a difference and how they would start to operate as a coherent 'whole'

- Clarity over the activity of the Board and what are the next steps
- Identify and really understand the small number of key things that will make a difference
- Develop and discuss new ideas
- Action not just words
- Make sure the Board 'adds value' to the work of the region's partners
- Better align work of the various bodies in the region with better and more integrated policies, co-ordinate views with clear focus
- Recognise it is a daunting task but working to one agenda and working together
- A key outcome would be to see how the Board would sustain the development of the rural South East
- The Board must champion rural investments – but identify the focus and not try to do too much
- Need to see real and genuine integration of the three strands of economic, social and environment. Real feeling of excitement that we are aiming for better integration and will be thinking holistically
- Recognise that a thriving rural environment will bring a thriving economy and integration is critical
- Increased understanding of commercial agriculture and horticulture and their contribution to the region's economy and get a more concerted regional effort to deliver support to sustainable food and farming.
- Need to understand better how trees contribute to the region
- Use the Board's ideas to influence national policies across Whitehall
- Make sure rural proofing happens
- Make sure that 'rural' does not get lost in mainstream activities
- Need a 'getting to know session' to help the Board work more effectively

3. Paul Bettison then thanked Poul Christensen and the Interim Board for all the hard work that had led to the setting up of the new structures, and that he was very keen to make the best use of the incredible expertise around the table. Board members constructive criticism would be welcomed.

ACTION AGREED

The next Rural Board to take the form of a day workshop, followed by an evening dinner. Dates to be canvassed immediately following the meeting.

Agenda Item 1 - update on the Rural Forum

4. A verbal update on the revised Rural Forum for the South East was given by Jeremy Leggett – who was acting as temporary chair of the new Forum until February 2009 when the new Chair will be elected.

5. The first meeting took place last week, 5th November. The Forum draws its membership from Local Strategic Partnerships, the county rural for and Rural Community Councils. The intention is that these grouping will then cascade messages out to their networks and bring in local 'grass roots' intelligence.

6. They have achieved only about half their membership so far. The Forum will meet quarterly and together with the Rural Board Chair will meet the Rural Minister – together with other regions.

One policy need was identified at the first meeting – that of the identifying and understanding the impact of demographic change; particularly the loss of 15-30 year olds in rural areas, and the increasing isolation and poverty for the elderly residents on set incomes.

Item 2 – Discussion on the Operations of the new Rural Board

7. A discussion paper had been circulated with the agenda. Valerie Carter of the Working Group outlined the Roles and Responsibilities of the two new bodies and how they would integrate their work, and complement each other. There were specific roles for both bodies on leadership, policy making, policy and delivery review and communications. The paper also set out how both the Board and the Forum would be supported by a Working Group – who would attend Board meetings. The paper also set out how the work of the Board and the Forum should be supported financially. Current funding held by GOSE would be adequate in the beginning but future work is likely to cost up to £50,000 paper year if specific work is commissioned.

8. The Board agreed the recommendations:

- (a) accepted the roles and relationships between the Board and the Forum – but we must all make sure we get the same level of understanding the whole rural picture in order to be effective. The away-day should address how to measure the Board's achievement of integration. No other region at present is operating like the South East and suggestion that Defra and DCLG be asked to support our ground-breaking approach. Must also make sure that the dates for both organisations fit in with each other and the Ministers meetings
- (b) accepted how the Board and members will operate
- (c) noted the need for additional resources likely to be needed
- (d) note that a decision will need to be resolved on new finances
- (e) confirmed that the operation of the Board and the Board membership will be reviewed at the 12 month period

ACTIONS AGREED

(i) The Working Group prepare a series of options on how to finance the work of the Board and Forum post 2009 to be submitted for decision by the Board at its next meeting. The options paper to make the case for a Board and a Forum. GOSE need to establish with Defra what the future level of funding is likely to be.

(ii) The WG to provide advice to the Board on how to achieve collective, common messages. This might include a newsletter to external partners – must make sure we include the Regional Rural Research Partnership

(iii) Make sure Board papers and minutes available on a website in a prominent way that is easy to find (SEEDA website currently being re-vamped). However must realise that not everyone like electronic messages

Make also be sure that specific messages are clear and formal, and use simple and clear language – for example what does ‘environmental ecosystems mean’ ?

(iv) Develop a common mission statement and discuss with Board members electronically – which can be agreed at the next Board meeting. Must make sure that it covers all three strands. We must also be clear on how we will measure success.

(v) WG to produce a forward agenda and forward workplan.

Item 3 – Discussion on Rural economy, communities and natural environment paper

9. Oona Muirhead of the Working Group made a presentation on the state of the region’s economy, focussing on rural business and communities.

10. During discussion the following points were made on the recommendations:

- Data. Need up-to-date data and sufficiently local, and covering social aspects. The JobSeekers Allowance data is not disaggregated: can this be done? Can we get benefits take-up data? Need to look at what data the Board can get from CRC.
- Opportunities during the recession. Need to focus on the low-carbon economy and the opportunities for rural business. What investments are needed to achieve sustainability in rural areas: eg ICT/Broadband. How could the planning pause be used to factor in sustainable living? We must use changes in people’s attitudes e.g. cost of fuel and driving and encourage exemplars for sustainable living.
- Short Term Trends and Interventions Need to focus on both what is needed in the short term, and what to do long-term. The long-term should be addressed at the Awayday.
- Employment opportunities. There was a very clearly identified piece of work needed immediately – that of looking at ways of securing labour for agriculture, particularly horticulture. There was a demand for local fruit and vegetables yet seasonable labour was decreasing and some crops last year were not picked. Can the land-based sector bring people back into employment, perhaps linking with benefits entitlement; and to some sort of skills certificate out of the period of employment: workers need to get something out of it as well as the employer. It might be possible to look at the Land Use and Environment Diploma, perhaps delivered through a consortium of colleges; though broader skills relevant to non-rural jobs would make the employment more attractive.
- Other employment opportunities might include the visitor economy, 2012 and low-carbon. The Board needs to look specifically at skills needs and use the experts to help us. Shortages have already been identified in
 - lab technicians are in short supply in Oxfordshire
 - skills in the built environment
 - skills in wind generation, solar panels etc
 - gaps in back up services for biomass heating packages

- must build on existing good practice such as training pool approach in marine sector; networks such as Regional Skills Productivity Alliance
- Communications The Board must develop some clear communications messages:
 - there are some good messages but we need to make them effective and build on the promotion of success stories. We need to improve public procurement using local products
- The Board needs to get clear messages to the Regional Minister.

ACTIONS AGREED

(i) The specific sub group set up to address the issue of labour in the land-based sector to be led by Shaun Leavey. He will assemble a team, set out the objectives for the group and timetable of the work. The work would look at encouraging local people on the unemployment register to take up this work as well as lobbying hard for government to support an improved seasonal agriculture workers scheme. They should look at skills accreditation and make a case that will be attractive to employers

(ii) The next Board meeting should focus on immediate short term needs and how to be ready to help business as they come out of recession and progress long term and must be very clear what actions should be taken

(iii) The Board should have a specific items on skills and skills shortages at the next meeting, with a skills expert

(iv) SEEDA send by email monthly updates to Board members on the economy

Current Rural Action Plan

11. Valerie Carter explained that the single Rural Action Plan had been included for reference. It is the current live document, agreed many months ago and covering social and environment action as well as economic ones. The plan will change as the Board develops it ideas on priorities.

Future Meetings

ACTION AGREED:

Board members were asked to let Valerie Carter of SEEDA know what days were unsuitable for Board members to meet. Fridays at 11 am were suggested as the ideal time. Dates will need to avoid Assembly meetings which are set out on their web site.

AOB

12. Poul Christensen wanted to record his specific thanks to the work of the Working Group in setting up the new Board and working with the Interim

Board. He also gave his best wishes to the new Board for the future as it was his last Board meeting as he was leaving SEEDA.

13. The meeting concluded with the Chair thanking those attending for their enthusiasm and recognition that this was the first step in a new chapter for rural affairs in this region.