

Somerset Rural Business Support Service

Evaluation Report

Contents	Page
Executive Summary	1
1. Introduction	2
2. Background	2
3. Methodology	4
4. Analysis	5
5. Conclusions	9
6. Recommendations	11
Appendices	
1. Anticipated Outcomes	
2. Questionnaire	
3. Summary of Questionnaire Answers	

Somerset Rural Business Support Service

Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

1. The Somerset Rural Business Support Service (SRBSS) was intended to be a two year project but started six months late and has only had a fully resourced team for six months during its operation.
2. The project has operated on a narrower front than stated in its aims and objectives principally fulfilling the role of a county-wide agricultural advice service.
3. There has not been any business system or performance management process in place to measure the performance of the project against its stated outcomes.
4. The anticipated outcomes relating to the wider rural economy have not been achieved.
5. The project is considered to be successful by its staff and those who have had direct contact with and support from it.
6. Recommendations include a need for a clearer focus on the projects aims and objectives, the introduction of business and performance management systems, making appropriate resources available, improving links with partner organisations and improving publicity of the work of SRBSS.

Somerset Rural Business Support Service

Evaluation

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report relates to an external evaluation of the Somerset Rural Business Support Service commissioned by South Somerset District Council and undertaken by Shaw Planning Limited during February and March 2008.
- 1.2 The evaluation took the form of an appraisal of the performance of the Service against the Project's Aims and Objectives and an assessment of how the Service performed against the expectations of the users of the Service.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Somerset Rural Business Support Service (SRBSS) is a project that was intended to run for two years commencing in April 2006 and finishing in March 2008.
- 2.2 The project was preceded by the Somerset Agricultural Advisory Service (SAAS). This provided a broad based support service to the agricultural community throughout Somerset and itself grew out of experience within the original Communities First in Rural Somerset in South Somerset where a need for individual advice for farmers was recognised.
- 2.3 The continuation of a broad based service offering a free one to one, direct support service to the land based sector was a recommendation of the Roger Tyms' SAAS report in 2004 that evaluated that particular project.

2.4 The application to the South West of England Regional Development Agency for funding for the SRBSS project recognised that although there were a number of support schemes in operation at national and local level within Somerset available to land based and agricultural businesses, these services were either specialist or open to members only.

2.5 The overall aim of the project was to provide an agricultural and rural business support programme across the County of Somerset offering:

- Quality agricultural/rural business guidance and support
- Signposting to additional rural business support
- Creating access to training, skills and development
- Assisting in the creation of rural networks and co-operatives

2.6 The anticipated outcomes from the project were:

1. Improve productivity, profitability and employment potential of small & medium firms through diversification, regeneration and upskilling programmes
2. Increased accessibility to services for disadvantaged groups of people
3. Creation of an effective signposting service for the rural sector i.e. – grants, networking, marketing. To provide information on policy and legislation, in particular CAP reform
4. Encourage the use of rural networks
5. Provision of effective lines of communication between rural communities and policy makers

6. Raising the profile of the Somerset Rural economy
7. Increase visitor spend from farm shops, pick-your-own, craft workshops, activity centres etc.
8. Raising the skills levels of the rural self employed and rural employees
9. To raise awareness of and access to IT and broadband in rural Somerset

3 Methodology

- 3.1 The performance of the Service against each of the above anticipated outcomes was evaluated by means of a questionnaire, face-to-face-discussions, email and telephone discussions.
- 3.2 18 questionnaires were sent out to the project partners and stakeholders. Five were returned representing a 28% response rate.
- 3.3 The majority of non-respondents were contacted by telephone or email and reasons for non response ascertained. These are referred to in 4.15 below.

4 Analysis

- 4.1 It became evident very early on during the evaluation of the project that although the outcomes had been expressed, largely, in quantifiable terms no business systems had been set up to collect statistics and produce performance indicators. The responses to the questionnaires therefore are almost entirely based upon perceptions of performance with little or no evidence to back up those perceptions.
- 4.2 In terms of **Outcome 1** the majority (60%) perception was that SRBSS had been effective in improving productivity, profitability and marketing of small and medium firms with 20% of replies stating that it had been very effective. 13% stated that SRBSS had been neutral in achieving this outcome whilst 7% stated that it had been ineffective.
- 4.3 40% of respondents in relation to **Outcome 2** admitted that they had no way of knowing how much, if at all, accessibility to services for disadvantaged people had improved. 40% felt that accessibility had been greatly improved whilst the remaining 20% considered it had improved. No respondent referred to previous experience of increasing accessibility for those without access to transport for instance by taking training out to the community rather than providing funds for training at one of the larger centres.
- 4.4 Generally respondents felt that SRBSS has been very effective as a signposting service, **Outcome 3** with 57% stating very effective and a further 29% stating it had been effective. The remaining 14% considered that SRBSS had been neutral.
- 4.5 Of the individual elements of the Outcome the respondents felt that signposting to grants was the most effective, followed by signposting to networking and then marketing. In terms of providing information on

policy and legislation 80% of respondents considered SRBSS had been very effective and 20% that it had been neutral.

- 4.6 There was unanimity amongst respondents that SRBSS had been very effective (60%) or effective (40%) in encouraging the use of rural networks, **Outcome 4**.
- 4.7 There was less certainty, however over the provision of effective lines of communication between rural communities and policy makers (**Outcome 5**) with 50% stating SRBSS had been effective, 25% stating neutrality and 25% feeling it had been ineffective.
- 4.8 Similarly with regard to **Outcome 6**, raising the profile of the Somerset Rural Economy, 60% felt SRBSS had been effective, 20% expressed neutrality and 20% felt it had been ineffective.
- 4.9 In terms of increased visitor spend, **Outcome 7**, there was recognition again that statistics had not been collected to assess SRBSS' performance empirically. However, 25% felt that SRBSS had been very effective, 50% effective and 25% felt that the effect had been neutral.
- 4.10 Of the types of visitor spend the majority of respondents felt that farm shops had attracted the most visitor spend (67%), and 17% craft workshops. 16% felt that rural tourism had attracted the most visitor spend.
- 4.11 **Outcome 8** relates to raising the skills levels of the rural self employed and rural employees. There was unanimity amongst respondents that SRBSS had either been very effective (50%) or effective (50%) in this regard.
- 4.12 In terms of raising awareness of and access to IT and broadband in rural Somerset, **Outcome 9**, 83 % felt that SRBSS had been very effective (50%) or effective (33%) and 17% felt it had had a neutral

effect in raising awareness. In terms of effectiveness of raising access to IT and broadband respondents considered that SRBSS had had a neutral effect.

4.13 As well as attempting to gain perception of the effectiveness of SRBSS in performing against its set outcomes the questionnaire also sought to gain opinion on the effectiveness of differing means of communication. 66% of respondents felt that face-to-face contact was the most effective means of communication whilst the remainder were equally split between email and post.

4.14 The questionnaire also attempted to elicit perception of staff quality. All respondents considered that SRBSS staff were willing to help. 80% considered that they were knowledgeable, polite and informative. Other characteristics identified included, flexibility, ability to think on one's feet, good access to information, and good knowledge of technology.

4.15 Of the seven non-respondents contacted about their non-response, three explained that as they were involved in managing the funding to SRBSS they felt it inappropriate to take part in the survey. The remaining four explained that had had insufficient contact with SRBSS to make any meaningful comments. It is interesting that these four were organisations that were stated to have links with SRBSS. It is likely that the signposting to these organisations by SRBSS does not register as strongly with the organisations as it should.

4.16 Individual farmers interviewed have expressed satisfaction and gratitude for the help and advice they have received from the service and the view is that they would like some form of one-to-one assistance to continue.

4.17 A former chair of the County National Farmers Union however, expressed the opinion that there was a plethora of organisations that was confusing and there was a growing feeling that too much effort is

being expended on training farmers, in IT in particular, whereas what are required are more practical assistance and capital injection.

4.18 During face-to-face interviews supplementary questions were asked of the respondents and these have identified a number of factors that should be taken into account in any evaluation of the project. These factors include:

- There was a sixth month delay in the start of the project due to the need to clarify the status of state aid via SWERDA.
- One of the District Councils did not start their recruitment process until funding was in place resulting in a further five month gap until the appropriate post was filled in February 2007.
- Somerset was experiencing uncertainty over a bid for unitary status and this was probably a reason for one of the District Councils accepting a request for voluntary redundancy from one of the SRBSS staff. That post was consequently vacated in July 2007.
- Political will was not consistent throughout the county resulting in one of the Districts not being as fully involved in the project as the partnership would have wished.
- The rural community suffered from Foot & Mouth and Avian Flu outbreaks that restricted the ability to carry out farm visits by officers.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 The project has continued the service developed under previous funding. However this has been on a rather narrow front with concentration on the farming community and not encompassing the wider rural economy.
- 5.2 Largely due to lack of staff resources the opportunity to build on previous experience in assisting the wider rural economy has not been taken, for example, by encouraging the amalgamation of rural retail services in community shops. Also examples of post offices closing but being relocated in village pubs such as happened at Burtle in Sedgemoor are isolated and have not been replicated as much as they perhaps could.
- 5.3 Farm shops have been a success but no research has been carried out into the effect they may have on other retail outlets in villages. It could, perhaps, be a better model whereby farmers are encouraged to supply village community shops with local produce thereby reducing the overall capital investment in buildings and reducing travel.
- 5.4 The project has been fortunate in having dedicated, knowledgeable and experienced staff to carry it through what might otherwise have been a resource crisis.
- 5.5 The SRBSS staff have understandably utilised their particular skills in training, business planning and, in the earlier stage of the project, equine businesses to provide a county-wide service, albeit on a somewhat narrow front.
- 5.6 The SRBSS staff have found themselves largely responding to individual approaches made to them and acting as a sign posting service to other organisations with more direct funding available to them.

- 5.7 The project has been particularly successful in signposting to assistance, information and advice available in other departments in the local authorities.
- 5.8 Working with other organisations has not been as prevalent as anticipated. Business Link is the only organisation that appears to have participated in any meaningful way in the project.
- 5.9 Of note are the comments from the NFU that there appears to be a large number of organisations with similar, and sometimes overlapping, aims leading to confusion.
- 5.10 Publicity of SRBSS has been almost entirely confined to press releases. Advantage has not been taken to use the partners' websites to publicise the work of SRBSS. Of the six websites operated by the local authorities only one had an easy link through its key word search facility on its opening page to an explanation of what SRBSS is, what it does, the criteria for qualifying for assistance and how to apply for assistance. None of the other sites had any meaningful reference to the existence of SRBSS.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 Management of a project like SRBSS needs a much clearer focus on its aims and objectives to avoid it becoming a continuation of the previous Somerset Agricultural Advice Service without encompassing the wider rural economy.
- 6.2 The project needs to have business systems and, in particular, performance indicators in place to measure the performance of the project against its stated outputs **and** outcomes.
- 6.3 Appropriate resources must be available from the start of the project and there should be certainty of the availability of these resources throughout the life of the project so that staff can concentrate on the job in hand.
- 6.4 The project should be publicised more widely as a county-wide service and the staff should continue to operate as a team. It is fortuitous that the staff have had the breadth of skills needed to operate as a county-wide team on much reduced resource. Team working should be a prime factor in staff selection processes.
- 6.5 The links made with organisations such as Somerset Foodlinks, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group and the NFU require strengthening. There needs to be more joint working rather than passing on, or signposting, of individual projects. The links need to be publicised and explained to the rural community so as to reduce confusion. Projects such as SRBSS need more publicity. Articles/advertisements in specialist journals should be used as well as press releases. Better use of the partners' websites is important. Success stories should be attributed to all organisations involved included especially where businesses have been signposted from one organisation to another.