

SOMERSET RURAL RENAISSANCE

Minutes of Partnership Board Meeting Meadway Hall Compton Dundon

Monday 23rd July 2007
10am-12.45pm

Present:

Board Members:

Rupert Cox – Chamber of Commerce (Chair)
Graham Mottram – Somerset Tourism Partners
Stuart Annett – Business Link Somerset
Nicola Slawski – Sedgemoor District Council
Peter Renshaw – Connexions
Andrew Moore – Somerset Food Links
Lesley Williams – Somerset County Council
Philippa Hawks – Leader+
Phil Cookson – Exmoor National Park
Angela Lamplough – W. Somerset District Council
Dennis Brewer – NFU
Charlotte Jones – SSDC (in place of Gerard Tucker)
Dominique Swain - MDC (in place of Ros Wilkins)
Sarah MacLean – CCS (in place of David Smith)
Andrew Clune - Royal Bath & West

Advisors:

Paul Chadwick – RR Scheme Mgr
Corinne Matthews – SCC Workspace
David Rees - SWRDA
Chris Langford – SCC
Laura Robertson – SCC (minutes)

1. **Apologies**

Gerard Tucker (SSDC); Helen Sharp (National Trust); Mike Murphy (Market Towns); David Smith (Community Council for Somerset); Ros Wilkins (Mendip DC); Hattie Winter (TDBC); Satnam Singh (LSC); Alan Madge (Job Centre Plus); Steve Marston (Blackdown Hills); Alan Madge (Job Centre Plus)

2. **Minutes of the Board meeting held on February 9th 2007**

These were signed as a correct record.

3. **Matters Arising**

It was confirmed that any matters arising had been included in the Scheme Progress Report.

4. **Scheme Progress Report (Paul Chadwick)**

- 4.1 Board members had the chance to attend the project visit day on May 9th to hear about several projects encompassing all three Programmes – the main Programme, the Workspace Programme and the Access to Services

programme. Paul used a Power Point presentation to convey detail about progress from April 28th 2005, the Scheme's commencement to the present time.

- 4.2 Main Programme: 20 projects approved to date under the 4 RR themes. Total value of Programme contract was £1.65million + £100,000 switched from Workspace. Almost all now fully contracted, with 1 approval to note from SMG meeting last week for a £100k allocation to the initial development stage and land assembly for the Cutcombe market project in West Somerset.
- 4.3 Workspace programme: 5 projects approved to date. Value of this Programme was originally for £500,000, now less the £100,000 returned to the main RR Programme. The issue with workspace is that it takes such a long time from inception to actual build and we need to invest all funds by March 08. Take up to date has been slow but interest over the last month has been heartening, following a press release with several potential projects showing interest. There is £179k of budget left to be allocated and £220k worth of aspiring projects. Further, and final, review of new bids will take place in September.
- 4.4 Outputs – It is clear that hitting the targets on outputs 2, 4 and 6 should not be a problem. However 1, 3 and 4a are proving more difficult and we are looking for a little flexibility on 4a with the RDA in terms of interpretation of this definition. Informally the RDA had signalled this.
- 4.5 Access to Services Programme: In 06/07 we spent £221k out of the allocation of £225k on 16 projects within a ten week period, which was a good performance thanks to the projects and RR Staff. For 07/08 10 projects have been contracted and £293k is allocated. Although access to services has different outputs, the project can still contribute to the main programme outputs as well.
- 4.6 Capacity Building Programme: Contract commenced 16th January. Rural Project Officers and Assistant RR post now in place and as a consequence there was more resource for assisting potential and actual projects with claims, monitoring and evaluation and project development via involvement in steering groups etc. There will also be improvements in the dissemination of the good project practice that has taken place and is ongoing we were late in getting the staffing resources together.
- 4.7 Paul concluded by identifying a number of challenges in this final year of RR funding:
 - Keep Scheme Spend & outputs to profile- slippages on outputs and spend reviewed quarterly and remedial action to be taken
 - Resolve problems with quality of evidence for a number of claims
 - Ensure good evaluation of projects to help inform next programme
 - Ensure transition to new programme is timely
 - Retain staff/expertise

- 4.8 In discussion it was felt that the main worry would be to lose momentum and the skills gained in this programme in the move to any new rural regeneration programme. The Board **agreed** that this point needed to be made to SWRDA.

5. Future Rural Regeneration Activities

- 5.1 David Rees provided an overview of the RDA's current thinking and indicated that there was still much to be determined. He emphasised that Somerset is regarded as one of the top performing partnerships and that would place it in a good position to further shape the thinking of the future programme. He noted the issue about potential loss of staff expertise if there was undue delay in the announcement as to what comes next. David reported that Colin Molton had written to the Chairs of partnerships asking them to meet with him again prior to the RDA Board meeting in September which is due to finalise the plans for the next programme.

Rupert then invited other Board members that had contributions to the debate about the likely shape and needs for rural regeneration as perceived from their agency/organisation.

- 5.2 Peter Renshaw of Connexions spoke about changes afoot in terms of career guidance delivery. He advised that there would be a much greater responsibility placed on schools for providing careers advice and guidance. He suggested that the national strategy will be to focus on 'hotspots', which may mean that Somerset is likely to miss out due to low numbers. There are also related issues of shortage of affordable housing and transport availability for youngsters to get to training.
- 5.3 Stuart Annett of Business Link explained the new arrangements that would commence as of Dec 2007 for this service with two operators in the South West. Business Link Somerset, partnered with Serco, has gained the contract to deliver the services for Devon, Cornwall and Somerset. The goal is to make sure that the best practice in Devon, Cornwall and Somerset will continue. He set in context the potential need for the services with there being 23,000 SMEs in Somerset and of these some 15,000, or 65%, could be defined as rural. Services had been provided to 6,550 rural businesses in 2006. He summarised by saying there were three key issues to address: make better use of available funding, raise the quality of businesses and improve the overall economic benefit.
- 5.4 Nicola Slawksi of Sedgemoor District Council provided a District Council perspective and highlighted a number of key issues to be addressed
- The need to shape the future of our places and communities
 - Improving economic prosperity
 - Tackling Low skills and aspirations
 - Lack of infrastructure
 - The need to Reduce deprivation
 - Lack of affordable housing

- Poor access to services
- Climate Change
- Protecting the environment
- Image of place and council

Nicola also spoke about the need for market & coastal towns to be provided with sustained funding over a period of time, to build upon the initial facilitation funding, and welcomed any prospect of there being better clarity of these funds being part of a simplified process.

5.5 Paul then presented some slides provided by Satnam Singh of the LSC. He highlighted the 3 critical issues of: raising the quality and choice of learning for young people; give employers and individuals the skills they need; and the need to raise contribution to economic development through partnership working. Some figures provided a sobering backdrop with 1995 figures compared to 2020 targets presented. Currently there were 77% of the adult popn in work and the target was for that to climb to 80%, but 30% of that popn did not have at least a Level 2 qualification and the target was to reduce that to just 10%; and only 23% of the popn had a Level 4 qualification whilst the target was for 40%. Paul reported that Satnam had emphasised the importance of Programmes such as RR to ensure that they looked holistically and worked with project applicants to help engineer these broader outcomes.

5.6 Lesley Williams introduced the need for links to the Local Area Agreements, and summarised that as of 2008 the Economy Theme of the LAS should be more robust. Clearly it would link to the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies, and it would need to address the future of market town economies.

(Copies of all Power Point presentations available on request)

5.7 Rupert thanked all of the contributors for their thought-provoking views and then invited discussion on what the objectives/priorities for any future Rural Programme should include. Amongst the issues raised were the following:

- Would like to see further/additional Access to Services investments available; for transport or for specific services itself
- Role of Market towns (& larger villages) is important for the wider hinterland as well as the towns/villages themselves, but need to be aware of different definitions, and also significant deprivation issue in particular communities
- Skills gap must be a priority
- Need to link to LAA but ensure there is a rural Board/partnership to determine specific investments
- Should have a focus on adding value to people & to the economy– take a holistic approach
- Climate change & the environment are important – carbon footprint issue

- Role for commissioning, but will need resources up front to do this and will need more evidence & information to specify the right commission 'level' and then make right decision
- Process needs to be transparent/clear and not changeable part way through
- Need at least a 5 year programme
- Need to keep local knowledge/skill base to help deliver initiatives along the lines of LEADER+ Programme where there is such input
- Could be economies of scale and shared expertise by having a number of programmes operated together. One stop shop for RDA Programme funds.
- Need to retain existing staff expertise if we are to avoid a gap, and then a delay in implementing any new programme.

6. Next Meeting Date

Rupert announced that the next Board Meeting date was to be **revised to 14th November 2007** and that would be an all day event. It would include a Review of Projects, with various evaluation presentations, and also further discussions on the next steps for future rural regeneration programmes. Details of the venue and an outline agenda would be circulated after the summer.