

# SOMERSET RURAL RENAISSANCE SCHEME

Somerset Rural Youth Project  
Exmoor Rural Skills Workshop

Interim Report  
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## Introduction

The Somerset Rural Youth Project is a charity and voluntary organisation set up in 1997 following a successful Rural Challenge bid.

The project aims to engage and support young people living in rural areas in a range of social, economic, educational and recreational opportunities designed to encourage social inclusion and life-long learning.

In November 2006, Somerset Rural Youth Project (SRYP) acquired funding from the Somerset Rural Renaissance Scheme (SRRS) to enable the organisation to undertake research work to ensure their Exmoor Rural Skills Workshop (ERSW) is delivering appropriate services to young people in order for it to become more effective and be sustainable in the longer term.

This document is an interim report based on the project to date and the comments respondents have made.

In this interim report, it is **not** intended to make recommendations but to report the discussions with interested parties and to record their feedback. It could also help to advise/influence the future activities/delivery.

## Methodology

Howard Marsh and Trina Nelson were employed by SRYP on a part-time basis to undertake the research work and have compiled this report.

Both Howard and Trina are youth workers within the organisation – they have endeavoured to be objective in their findings but their views are from a youth workers perspective.

Where possible, 'face-to-face' discussions with groups and individuals have been conducted to provide the information contained within this report – all supporting hard evidence of these will be available should people so wish.

Some communications have been made by telephone, letter, or electronically to organisations and individuals (both adult and young people) – the writers are aware that some of these will need to be pursued as the project proceeds.

The writers have also been given further lists of people and organisations to contact (list available).

Some historical SRYP documents have been referred to ascertain the processes towards the current position of the workshop.

## The Workshop itself – ‘It does what it says on the tin!’

The Exmoor Rural Skills Workshop is one of the Somerset Rural Youth Project's Economic projects, which provides a comprehensive package of support to assist rural young people become economically active.

The workshop is an educational resource based in a building owed by the Exmoor National Park Authority (EPNA) and managed by the Somerset Rural Youth Project at Ashcombe near Simonsbath in the West Somerset area of Somerset.

The aim of the workshop is to provide a challenging rural environment for young people aged 13-19 to develop hard and soft skills (explained in a later section) that will improve their ability to access further education and employment opportunities.

The objectives are to:

- Raise young people's awareness of environmental issues
- Help develop self-esteem
- Encourage teamwork and co-operation
- Enhance social skills
- Provide necessary skills to improve employment options

The workshop offers the opportunity to try a variety of rural and environmental activities in an informal, educational and supportive environment that will motivate learning, challenge stereotyping and encourage practical career based learning.

Activities at the Workshop include:

Maintenance:

- Dry-stone walling
- Footpath maintenance
- Riverbank erosion
- Silver birch clearing
- Rhododendron clearing

Wildlife

- Building and siting nesting boxes
- Animal surveys
- Tree planting
- Deer spotting

## Local walks of interest

- Wheel Eliza Mine
- Pinkery Pond
- Birch Cleeve

The Workshop is now a recognised ABC Training Centre and there is the opportunity for participants to work towards gaining a VRQ (Vocational Related Qualification) in Practical and Environmental Skills which is recognised within the National Framework of Qualifications.

The workshop operates throughout the year and can be booked for daytime, evening or weekend programmes subject to seasonal weather conditions and is equipped to cater for groups of up to 16 people.

The sessions are organised and delivered by a team of trained youth workers with the help of local contractors and the ENPA as appropriate.

The current staff team consist of:

- |               |   |  |
|---------------|---|--|
| Mark Champion | – | Mark is a Student Project Worker currently Undertaking an MA in Youth Work and Community Development at DeMontfort University. He is a qualified counsellor and started work at ERSW in January 2005 |
| Madi Robinson | – | Madi is a qualified Worker-in-Charge and holds a C&G 730 initial training qualification for Teaching Adults in Further Education   |
| Bob Moreton   | – | Bob is a part-time sessional worker, was a sergeant in the army and has 7 years experience at ERSW   |

Health and Safety is seen as a priority and risk assessments have been carried out for each site, and activity, before young people are taken on-site (a sample assessment is included as an appendix).

## Recent developments

Talking to individuals and looking through historical documents that have been referenced (see appendices) the following points have been addressed and progressed:

- An VRQ accredited course has been written and implemented

Following the successful application to ABC the Skills Workshop became an accredited training centre in February 2005. Barnaby

Simmons and Mark Champion developed and finalised the modular programme of accreditation for groups using the centre - the current status expires in February 2008 when SRYP will need to re-apply.

The programme allows for future expansion of a number of modules as opportunities/training needs are identified.

To meet the needs of the young people this course was written at Level 1 – it seems to suit the current users of the workshop some of whom have basic skills needs. If the young people complete the whole course of 5 modules it is the equivalent of a lower grade GCSE – current groups undertake either of the two mandatory modules of ‘Teamwork’ or ‘Health and Safety’ during their 10 week programmes and would progress to any of the three optional modules should they return for further sessions.

- Young people are being accredited for the work they are doing

SRYP are endeavouring to accredit the work of young people in all of its projects. As for the users of the workshop who have been struggling, at risk of disengaging or at risk of exclusion in school, the provision is seen by educational professionals as a good way to maintain young people within mainstream education.

- Movement away from being a ‘childminding’ service

In delivering an accredited qualification the workshop has moved away from being a ‘childminding’ service that was often seen by users as an alternative way of occupying young people.

At the outset, the move to accrediting the young peoples work was seen by the staff as a threat to the informal youth work practices being used in its delivery – the ABC programme is now imbedded into the core activities undertaken at the workshop.

- Improvements to the workshop

Staff at the workshop have spent some considerable time in providing a stimulating environment by improving the fabric of the workshop. A dividing wall has been erected to create office space for staff and a defined working area for groups. The work area has also been painted and a number of the young people have made rustic furniture.

- Equipment has been catalogued and stored

As part of the general tidy up, the tools in the workshop have been placed in secure cupboards, have been catalogued and placed on an equipment inventory

- Appointment of staff

Appointments of new part-time staff stabilised work patterns at the workshop for a period but due to poor retention staffing remains an issue.

The departure of Barnaby Simmons in the autumn of 2006 meant that the workshop lost a member of staff with a professional environmental qualification (Human Ecology). His knowledge is greatly used and had a great bearing on the development of the VRQ course at the workshop.

- Usage by groups has increased

A variety of groups have used the workshop over the last few years at times this has meant that it has been delivering to its capacity. Although this is seen as very positive, it does have an impact on the staff team in managing the administrative demands of delivering the ABC course and the additional demands placed on them by the organisation

- Service Level agreements

User groups who make regular use of the workshop have worked with the staff to ensure that service level agreements are in place before they begin their programmes to provide greater professionalism and stability for the ERSW

- Risk assessments

Before a group visits any work site, the staff ensures that a risk assessment has been carried out both for the site and for the tools that will be employed on that activity

A set of guidelines have also been drawn up for safe usage of the mini-buses used to transport the young people to and from the workshop and the various sites used by the different groups

- Improve publicity

A number of documents referenced say that publicity should be improved. Even in the short time this project has been operating a number of publications have been identified where the workshop has been mentioned but no contact details have been given

- gRASP funding secured (Giving Rural Advice and Support)

The workshop has secured funding to help give the young people advice and support in thinking about the world of work. Whilst some of the younger groups have not put a great deal of thought into what they want to do, those in Year 11 are being encouraged to think about their future careers.

At the beginning of the course one-to-one discussions with participants are conducted to set an informal learning plan that is monitored during the course and reviewed at the end of the 10 weeks.

Newly purchased computer equipment from a successful bid to The Somerset Youth Opportunities Fund for £4,150 by Kingsmead year 9 students will enable young people to access job search websites; to type or update their CV's; and allow research of environmental issues, rural skills and techniques etc.,

## What the users / partners say about ERSW

We asked young people, youth workers, partners and people in local government positions to give us their thoughts of the work delivery at the workshop. What follows is a selection of their responses:

### Advantages

Barnaby Simmons (ex-project worker at ERSW) drew up the following list of unique selling points about the workshop before his departure (some have been added to reflect current provision):

- It's on Exmoor – a National Park created in 1954. The EPNA aim to:
  - To conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Park; and**
  - To promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the Park by the public**
- It is supported by Exmoor National Park Authority and is an important part of the National Park commitment to local people (sustainability the future etc).
- The Park Authority has provided use of a building and funding (in kind contributions)
- The use of youth work methodology and informal education to engage and ensure retention of young of young people within the provision

- Visits develop 'both hard' and 'soft skills' consecutively - these were defined by John Quilter in the March 2002 Alchemy Training and Consultancy report as:

**Soft skills** – *'emotional intelligence' – including skills that relate to and develop communication skills, self-esteem, self-worth, self-discipline, confidence, personal values and behaviour ability to create positive relationships and general social skills*

**Hard skills** – *the practical skills required to achieve a specific task or job which is predominately of a mature nature – examples at ERSW include dry stone walling, footpath and riverbank maintenance, hedge planting and laying*

- There is an informal atmosphere with different behavioural boundaries to school
- Young people have a participatory role in drawing up their own ground rules (see appendices) and selecting their own programme giving greater ownership and pride in their work and achievements
- There is a wide range of areas of study not found in the national curriculum e.g. woodworking, stone carving, horticulture, practical environmental education (vegetation clearance, conservation projects), investigations into the local rural economy (trips to local businesses) etc.

Other responses were:

SRYP has a proven track record of working with, and achieving positive outcomes with disaffected young people, young people likely to disengage from school and those exhibiting challenging behaviours.

A number of respondents have commented on the 'uniqueness' of the provision and it's setting within the EPNA.

Jane Craven from Knigsmead School commented the School had been praised for its alternative curriculum and we would like to think the ERSW has played a part in this.

The Scout group we consulted commented that its location was one of the main deciding factors for their visit that formed part of an annual residential experience and practical experiences for D of E participants.

Respondents echoed the positive selling point of SRYP and ERSW as being a registered accredited training centre through ABC (previously known as the Awarding Body Consortium) who are one of the largest vocational awarding bodies within the UK with an established reputation for quality and customer service. The Practical Environmental Studies Course is currently delivered at

level one and forms part of the National Qualifications Framework and therefore educational establishments can claim it as 'working towards' a GCSE qualification.

## The disadvantages

- The workshops physical location means there are long distances to travel for those wishing to visit
- Out of county participants may mean conflict with funding requirements - there is the dilemma that the ENPA covers a large geographical area that spans two counties i.e. Western Somerset and North Devon
- Anne Phillips, a Connexions Manager in Taunton commented that due to the distance to travel she was reluctant to let her staff escort young people in their own cars particularly if there was inclement weather
- Activities are whether dependant and causes difficulty for educational establishments when sessions have to be cancelled at, what quite often is, short notice
- A 'residential experience' is often requested by groups
- Groups/individuals attending the workshop are selected by the visiting organisation so staff do not get to meet the young people before they start. However, new groups are given the opportunity to experience a 'Taster Day' if they so wish.
- Attention spans of some of the groups or repetitiveness of some of the longer-term activities can create behavioural issues

## Young Peoples Feedback

We have gathered much information from current user groups and some groups of young people who have attended in the past.

With the current groups, we are using a simple questionnaire to obtain their responses – this will be an ongoing exercise with a fuller feedback in the projects final report (see appendices for example).

Trina has set up a number of 1:1 meetings with young people she has tracked from groups who have attended ERSW in the past. She has experienced difficulties in establishing contact with some individuals but of course it is their prerogative as to whether they want to engage in the process or not.

Those who have agreed to take part this far have given some very interesting responses. Two case studies are attached as appendices for information.

The common themes were:

- For many, the 'break' away from school and 'normal' timetable is a positive experience
- Those who have difficulty in writing skills dislike the written elements of the course but understand why it has to be done

## Feedback About The Workshop Staff Team

A reoccurring comment is the professionalism of the staff team.

A number of user groups have made positive comments about the young peoples acquisition of skills – not just practical skills but life skills, team working etc - skills that would be welcomed in the workplace.

Tutors and Teachers have also commented how positive experiences at the workshop have been taken back into the educational environment prompting fewer behavioural issues within classroom situations.

Jane Craven from Kingsmead School commented that: "for those young people who have caused issues within school, the visits to the workshop has given them something to aim for and they gain a sense of achievement in their work there – behaviour learnt is being brought back into the school environment".

Steve Lucas from the Sedgemoor Referral Unit explained that: The young people at the unit are permanently excluded from school largely due to behavioural issues – their attendance at ERSW is voluntary and the group are asked who wants to attend – not having been up to the moor before, it opens their eyes to environmental issues, appropriate conduct, the country code and team working"

## Opportunities and threats

The Workshop itself

At the time of writing, the biggest uncertainty is the future of the workshop at Simonsbath with West Somerset Council's proposed redevelopment of the site. It is understood that there would not be allocated space for the workshop within the proposals but it is believed that other ENPA sites maybe a available to SRYP but nothing has been formally agreed to date.

Funding issues

There is a line of thought when it comes to securing funding 'What comes first the provision or funding?'

It is recognised that this provision is expensive to deliver. The question arises whether it could be self-sufficient – a more formalised proactive approach, with a clear focus on forward planning, will need to be adopted in order to attract new user groups.

If by increasing publicity, will the workshop be able to deliver to the increasing numbers who want to use the facility?

Funding streams often have strings attached to attract numbers, to meet milestones, and so on. This raises the question as to whether whoever writes the bid is setting achievable targets. It has also been drawn to our attention that educational establishments also need to secure funding their own before committing groups to attend the workshop.

One group consulted further explained how they fell foul of their own funding requirements when they over calculated how many of their users would be interested in attending the workshop sessions.

## Attracting new groups / Publicity

As mentioned earlier: publicity, funding and the process of attracting new groups to the workshop will dictate the future direction of the project.

Currently, most users come from Schools or other educational establishments. However, if the provision is to expand, some concentrated work around advertising the facility and what could be offered needs to be undertaken.

Whilst current staff have sent letters to schools and PRU's other routes of advertising could be:

- Press releases to highlight current work
- Use of other areas of the media
- Mail shots to other youth organisations and publications
- Mail shots or adverts to specialist activity or tourist publications
- Produce a 'Publicity Pack'
- Dedicated website for the Skills Workshop with links from SRYP sites

It is also worth highlighting that we have identified a number of articles or publications that have included or made reference to the skills workshop but have not included contact details.

## Possible Future Staffing issues

If the aim is to increase the advertising and usage of ERSW, there will need to be equal emphasis on having a team available and able to deliver the sessions. These staff also needs to have the appropriate knowledge of rural and youth work skills to be able to engage with the varied client groups and to deliver the VRQ programme.

The remoteness of the site has a contributory factor in attracting and maintaining staff particularly when trying to fill part-time positions. When advertising for staff there is a limited pool of people who would want to do youth work – being in such an isolated position this pool is obviously that much smaller.

In discussion with the ERSW youth workers, we heard that the Parish Council had only recently learnt about the workshop and what goes on there – it was felt that due to the workloads on a small staff team there was not the opportunities to be more pro-active in publicising and promoting the workshop or attracting new ‘work’ jobs for groups to undertake.

There also seems to be local concern about ‘keeping things local’ and many have expressed they would not like to loose the ERSW provision to another site.

Other considerations that need to be addressed

- Are there enough ‘groups’ who want the ‘formal’ qualification?
- ‘Qualifications’ of staff may dictate provision?
- ‘Work tasks’ are dependant on them being provided by ENP or landowners – expansion in this area?
- Publicity – not known in community? Can we improve it?
- Communications / feedback (at different levels)
- Attracting young women to participate –
- Widening provision to other groups / organisations / disabilities etc
- Involvement of young people in planning (the groups ground rules)  
How possible/realistic is this?
- Issue of ‘out of county’ groups using the facility

## Young People into Local Employment

Skills acquired at ERSW

There are a number of publications that aim to help young people with preparation of C.V.’s, letters of application and interview skills. One such Connexions publication (which I think is now out of print) lists a ‘Top 10 List’ of

things employers are looking for when considering young people for employment.

1. Positive attitude to work
2. Pride in their work
3. Reliability
4. Punctuality
5. Able to follow instructions
6. Trustworthiness
7. Enthusiastic
8. Work as part of a team
9. Able to work accurately
10. Willingness to learn

From comments received from those interviewed thus far we believe young people are gaining experience in some, if not all of these areas, together with improved communications and listening skills – the provision is therefore seen as meeting the needs of employers.

The ESF funding and the gRASP project has 'added value' to the work by helping with the transition from; the skills acquired with 'hands-on' practical experiences; to entry into the world of employment.

The young people are using their VRQ qualification by including it in their Progress Reports, Records of Achievement and personal C.V.'s.

## Contacting local employers

In discussion with a number of our contacts we are beginning to build a list of local employers that we could contact – to date we have not started this process and considerations need to be made as to what we want to gain from these meetings.

It is felt that initial meetings with the local Chamber of Commerce and Business Link may be the best way forward. Plus, ERSW also has a list of small local businesses and landowners who have contributed to the work of ERSW and may engage with the process.

In discussion with Angela Lamplough (Rural Facilitator with the Regeneration & Policy Team of West Somerset Council) she informed us that there is a skills shortage in West Somerset area and that younger people are not learning traditional skills – it's an ageing workforce – so in this respect, ERSW provision is very important for those young people wishing to pursue these traditional occupations. She intimated that specialist workers are being sourced from outside the county and being 'bought in'.

We were also directed to a piece of research undertaken by Deborah Cossey of the West Somerset District Council in 2004 which highlights West Somerset

Farmers interest in training topics which covers many areas of work currently undertaken at the workshop e.g. Hedgelaying and woodland management.

Of the young people we have spoken to, a number come from farming families and would be likely to continue in this area of work whilst others have manual and building trades in mind.

There are young people who have not thought much about their futures whilst others have over ambitious expectations e.g. "I'm going to become a professional boxer and earn £15m a match" or "I'm going to own a fleet of limousines and transport film stars around". However we have heard an anecdotal story about a lad called Jensen Button who visited Frome Connexions wanting to be a Formula 1 driver?

The gRASP funding will greatly help in this area of work in focusing young people on their future prospects.

We have been able to source copies of 'Destination Reports' for two of the West Somerset Area Schools from our contacts at the Connexions Service – these show where students have progressed from Year 11. Both show a high number moving onto sixth form or further education so there is still some way to go to try and identify where young people finally end up post full-time education.

We had conversation with Dave Gurnett EPNA and he feels that many young people know what they want to do and are motivated enough to get there – those who go onto college do so to get further relevant qualifications e.g. many seek to gain chainsaw certificates or small truck training.

## What's the competition locally?

Respondents were continually telling us that the ERSW provision was unique in that it provided an opportunity for young people to work towards a VRQ qualification and practice rural skills in a truly rural setting.

There are local colleges that offer land based training opportunities these include West Somerset College (which we understand is having a 'new build' on site), Cannington College at Bridgwater and Devon College.

There is also the Burnworthy Outdoor Activity Centre and Bridgwater College who operate on a 'Forest School' approach with outdoor activity based programmes.

Pinkery (near the Simonsbath site) is the Exmoor National Park Authority's residential centre for outdoor education. It's used by a wide variety of groups and the visiting groups usually set their own programmes.

Simonsbath House Outdoor Centre offers activities for younger children between the ages of 8 – 12 during school holidays and bank holidays. These include mountain biking, art, archery etc.

## Future Opportunities

As far as future developments for the workshop is concerned depends very much on where its new location is likely to be, future funding streams, SRYP countywide developmental demands and staffing considerations.

The nature of the current setting lends itself to exploration of the area in its widest sense as can be seen from local tourist publications with much emphasis being placed on the natural aspects of the moor and its exploration.

The issues of distance to travel has been raised on a number of occasions and the suggestions of mobile provision or 'satellite' workshops in each district e.g. on the Mendip's or Blackdowns, has also been raised as a possibility. As Steve Lucas said "its only needs to be a shed to get out of the rain!"

The question also needs to be asked 'what do we want to deliver?' 'Are we a youth provision or training provider?'

Having said that, those we have spoken to very much like the current set up but there are obvious ways that activities, other than the traditional skills, could be seen to fit in with the current accreditation delivery and the needs of the young people to also want to have some 'fun' experience. For example, a number of young people have explained that they want to go into the services or catering trades when leaving school so there maybe some mileage in developing rough cooking and/or survival skills. SRYP staff have visited residential centres where much use has been made of current trends on TV such as 'I'm a celebrity' type 'Bushtucker' trials, 'Can't cook. Won't cook' and survival based programmes such as the one presented by Ray Meares.

There is also the possibility of using the workshop at different times of the week to attract alternative groups e.g. early morning fungi forays or dawn chorus walks. Evening trips e.g. to watch badgers sets.

We have also been told that there is a lot of weekend activity with walkers who use the Ashcombe car park facilities – maybe we can encourage groups to have greater interaction with the public combined with possible fundraising activities?

## The 'Green' agenda and Information Technology

The growing use of information technology means that knowledge and information could be shared locally and across the globe. For example, young people could take photographs of the area and post them on the web; take

part in national surveys such as the RSPB's National Garden Birds Survey or follow developments on website pages such as the BBC's Springwatch or 'Its not easy being green'.

The young people also seem to get more satisfaction if they can see that they are getting something from the activity. Although there is the element of 'they are here to 'work' and as part of a team' these skills can also be used if say forest school approaches are used in building a shelter or making a fire.

Although in its infancy there maybe some mileage in further developing the work the current year 10 group are doing with the allotment. Several crops of potatoes and other vegetables were grown last year maybe a visit to one of the local farmers markets could be arranged or possibly enter local country shows. In-house competitions for say the biggest pumpkin could prove interesting for all concerned?

Schools are also exploring different curriculum ideas. Much emphasis is being placed on the 5 outcomes for young people and more recently the government have produced a manifesto entitled 'Learning Outside the Classroom' which states that:

*'... every young person should experience the world beyond the classroom as an essential part of learning and personal development, whatever their age, ability or circumstance ...'*