

Executive Committee 8 September 2000

Report of SEEDA Rural Development Committee - 11th July 2000

Key topics under discussion:

- Update on current SEEDA rural activity
- Rural Project Database
- Green Tourism
- Agriculture
- SEEDA's rural action plan

Current SEEDA activity

- Input from SEEDA staff to: DTI research into alternative energy sources in the region; Leader+ strategy for the region where the lead is with MAFF; support for Rural Towns SRB bid development; responding to MAFF consultations on marketing and the Rural Enterprise Scheme
- A study into local abattoirs has been agreed and is starting
- A SEEDA food web page with appropriate links is being created
- Hampshire County Council have seconded somebody to help SEEDA work on Farmers Markets

Rural projects and initiatives database

There was much discussion about the need for a database of rural projects and initiatives throughout the region. This appears to be a priority for the Committee,

however resources seem to be scarce to set it up and long term sustainability would seem to be a major issue if it is to be of use. The point was made and accepted that to be successful, whatever branding it appeared under, it would have to be published and updated on the web and have a broad partnership behind it.

Tourism

There was an extensive exchange of views and information about tourism and its potential to support the rural economy. Central to most of the discussion was the unavoidable convergence of heritage, local produce, transport, visitor management and accommodation with wider issues such as inward investment, planning and infrastructure. One of the key points of contact for all these issues appeared to be branding of the South East and its sub-regional areas. The Committee felt that the SEEDA Committees dealing with Tourism and Inward Investment had a major role to play in this area and it was tempting to shy away from branding issues on the basis that they were too difficult to grapple with.

The Committee's role in relation to Tourism seems to relate to promoting existing and potential initiatives and trying to ensure that in other SEEDA work the needs of the rural economy is a priority.

Agriculture

The discussion on agriculture seemed to fall into two distinct parts: 1. what can SEEDA do given the macro economic forces at work and 2. is there a more innovative analysis and approach to the rural economy that could bring longer term benefits.

Most of the discussion about what SEEDA can do related to helping MAFF with the Rural Development Regulation and bending SEEDA's own resources, such as for training and the Rural Development Programme to meet the needs of agriculture.

The second strand of the discussion questioned some of the conventional economic wisdom in agriculture and looked at energy crops, encouraging smaller holdings in which enthusiastic young people could establish small land based businesses and other more innovative business ideas. This seemed to have the potential for some decisions about the nature of a rural enterprise hub and this will be on the agenda for a future meeting.

Rural Action Plan

The Committee went through the Action Plan trying to minimise the number of separate priorities. The nature of the discussion does not make it easy to set out exactly what was agreed, however the separation of SEEDA lead and SEEDA supporting roles was a significant issue for a sector with so many interested organisations with apparent leads in their own area.

Jeremy Leggett

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