

By: Kevin Lynes
Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Economic Development

David Cockburn
Head of Paid Service and Corporate Director of Business
Strategy and Support

To: Regeneration and Economic Development Policy Overview
and Scrutiny Committee – 23 March 2012

Subject: Feedback report from REDPOSC Rural visits

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary:

The report provides an overview of the recent rural visits to projects, funded through the **Kent Downs and Marshes LEADER Programme** (*The Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) is funded by Defra and the EU. The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD): Europe investing in rural areas*), by REDPOSC and outlines the key issues identified.

1. Introduction

- 1.1** At their meeting on 24th June, REDPOSC identified that 'rural' would be a priority focus for the forthcoming year. Following on from visits to rural projects in September, a visit was arranged to Kent Downs and Marshes Leader funded projects on 25th November. The tour was received well by Members and a second tour to other projects assisted by the Kent Downs and Marshes Leader Programme was arranged for 16th February 2012.
- 1.2** The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of this second visit, set out any issues raised and identify areas for possible future consideration.

2. Visits to Projects

- 2.1** Members were taken on the tour by Kent Downs and Marshes Leader (KDM) programme staff. Members were also accompanied by representatives of the KDM Local Area Group Executive.
- 2.2** The Kent Downs and Marshes Leader is part of the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) funded by Defra and the EU. KDM Leader was awarded a total programme budget of £2.25 million in 2008 to support projects within a specific geographical area. Of this, £1.8 million was allocated to project costs, the remaining £450,000 being allocated to facilitation and administration of the programme.
- 2.3** Total programme budget was reduced in the 2010 Comprehensive

Spending Review to £1,651,933. To date approximately £1,200,000 has been awarded to projects, of which approximately £895,000 is in capital grants to small and micro enterprises and community enhancement projects. The total cost of these capital projects is approximately £2,800,000 representing a leverage of 1:2. This investment has helped to create more than 26 FTE positions, whilst helping to sustain a further 150 jobs in the KDM Leader area. The programme will run until December 2013. Members visited the following projects supported by KDM Leader.

2.4 Godinton House – Timber stackyard, Woodchip store and handling machinery for supplying biomass at Godinton.

The Business: The Godinton House Estate is run as a single business, employing 5 FTE staff in forestry, horticulture and estate management for the purpose of conserving and improving the house, gardens and estate for public benefit and education. The business incorporates the long-term preservation of the Grade 1 listed house, gardens and park. The house and gardens are open to the public between Easter and October for which a small charge is made. Additional to this, the Estate maintains its traditional properties of farms, forest, houses and cottages, some rural workshops and a small office development heated by a biomass boiler.

2.5 The Project: The project involved the conversion of a redundant Dutch barn, on the estate, into a woodchip store by repairing the damaged roof and guttering, laying a hard floor and erecting retaining walls; allowing space for the storage of approximately 100 tonnes of woodchip. A hard track was also laid to the barn and storage area, and part of the paddock was surfaced with hardcore to provide all weather access, along with stacking areas for timber rounds and a clean area for chipping and handling. Funding was provided to help with ground and building works, the purchase of a timber trailer and crane, and a specialised tractor bucket for woodchip.

2.6 Key findings:

- The project has allowed the Estate's woodlands to be managed more effectively, bringing previously unmanaged woodland back into economic use. It is also helping the estate reduce its energy costs.
- The Estate employs local contractors to fell and chip the wood, this project helped secure regular business for these contractors. Overall 5FTE positions have been supported.
- There is the potential to create a facility or hub on the estate that can be extended to serve the growing demand for woodfuels, especially around the growing town of Ashford.
- The boilers, systems and processes in place are being utilised as an educational tool/best practice example of biomass heating, encouraging others to adopt this sustainable practice. By improving the efficiency and sustainability of the fuel supply, a complete system, from forest to heat, can be demonstrated.

2.7 Romney Marsh Wools:

The Business: Romney Marsh Wools is a farmer controlled business with two main strands to its operations. Initially a sheep farming business, the applicant has since diversified the income stream to include added-value revenue generated from the retailing of sheep wool products. The business farms a breeding flock of Romney and Merino sheep for both meat and wool production. Lambs are predominantly sold at Ashford livestock market whilst the wool is sheared on farm and then processed and sold as part of the 'Romney Marsh Wools' business.

At present the whole company employs two people equating to one full time equivalent. The applicant is 6th generation farmer of pedigree Romney sheep and has been doing so for approximately 6 or 7 years. Romney Marsh Wools (the wool side of the business) itself has been operating since 2007

2.8 The Project: The project involves the conversion of an existing agricultural building to provide the appropriate storage space for the applicant's wool crop, in a suitably controlled environment. Parallel to this the applicant is developing an existing website to enable on-line sales, a dedicated office space to support the administrative management of the business and also attend targeted, high-end fairs and shows to directly market the products. Assistance was given to help with building works, equipment, website development and marketing costs.

2.9 Key findings:

- This is a good existing farm diversification project that is looking to expand due to growing demand for its local products. The business makes good use of local produce that is manufactured into high quality finished articles.
- It is a well thought out project with realistic ambitions realised through a well presented business and marketing plan. It is an entrepreneurial venture that has the potential to grow and potentially create small scale employment in the future. The product is distinctive and has other good ancillary links with other aspects of the Romney Marsh.

2.10 Royal Military Canal – Recreation Access Project:

The Project: This involved working with KCC PROW team and Shepway DC to create a new 1 mile section of bridleway along the canal's northern bank between West Hythe Dam and Aldergate Bridge, offering safe off-road riding, cycling and walking facilities. The facilities provide a ½ day circular route along the canal and the lanes on the adjoining Romney Marsh. The route will form part of the Sustrans National Cycle Route 2. Seating and interpretation has been installed to inform visitors of the natural heritage and the historical sites of Lympne and Stutfall castles. The project also acts as a pedestrian access for Port Lympne Animal

Park. The project will also be used as a pilot for the creation of an all access day cycle ride along the entire length of the canal, linking Hythe and Rye with the villages of Warehorne, Oxney, Appledore, Ruckinge and Bilsington. Since opening in April 2011, the route has attracted over 40,000 visitors.

2.11 Key Findings:

- The project represented a good example of using a significant historical feature as a cultural and recreational resource, providing direct benefit to Port Lympne Animal Park and other tourism operators, as well as providing a 'living classroom' resource for use by schools and other education/environmental groups.
- The project contributed directly to a number of regional, sub-regional and local plans and strategies around the themes of access, enjoyment and understanding; historic and cultural heritage; sustainability; health and well being; physical activity; education and environment; safety; rural prosperity; natural resources. The project brought into use an extra 20% of accessible bridleway alongside the canal

2.12 Waldron Chestnut Joinery.

The Business: Nick Waldron is a sole trader who manufactures high end bespoke furniture and joinery for private and commercial customers. Currently all work is made to commission but the applicant is looking to expand into some batch production items. Casual labour is used from time to time and the business has now expanded enough to take on an apprentice.

2.13 The Project: This project involved the purchase of equipment to increase the use of locally sourced timber to increase profitability, diversify income streams, reduce environmental impact and expand the operation. The project will develop the use of chestnut for manufacturing external and internal joinery, with an initial focus on its use for window framing where its durability and look is an advantage. This will reduce the need/use of imported softwoods and provides an alternative for Oak. Assistance was provided to purchase a four sided planer moulder and dust extractor. The equipment has greatly improved the capacity of the business by significantly reducing the time taken to plane and mould sawn timber into a usable product, thus allowing the applicant to concentrate more effort and time in servicing increasing demand.

2.14 Key findings:

- This is an innovative and entrepreneurial project that now has the opportunity to grow through the increased capacity provided by the new equipment. The business has good links with other wood supplying businesses in the area (many Leader supported) creating a local network making use of an abundant sustainable

resource for local construction/joinery. The business has already taken on an apprentice and there is the possibility of future employment creation.

- The project adds value to locally sourced timber and reduces the need to use imported softwoods. It also provides an alternative for more expensive Oak. Through this project the applicant is demonstrating an alternative use for less expensive and more abundant chestnut products which can act as an example to others.

2.15 Chilham Village Square - long term regeneration and environmental improvement project (community engagement phase).

The Business: Chilham's Future Delivery Board (CFDB) is a non-profit making Company Limited by guarantee set up by Chilham Parish Council with the sole aim of delivering a regenerated community square within the village.

2.16 The Project: Grant support was provided for the engagement of an expert consultant in the field of urban design and community consultation. The consultant undertook a wide ranging community engagement exercise to reach a consensus on the best solution for rejuvenating the village square as a place to live, work and visit. The exercise resulted in the development of a technical brief, with buy-in from statutory stakeholders, which addresses the needs of the local community, bringing a broad spectrum of far reaching benefits. The brief can now be used as a basis to approach large scale funders, like HLF etc for help with implementation.

2.17 Key findings:

- The information received and evidence provided suggested that the need to "do something" with the square has been previously well backed and supported. Leader provided the support required to take project to the next level; a community consultation process to agree a professionally designed scheme that would provide a blueprint/evidence base that could be submitted to other larger funding bodies to make the scheme a reality.
- If the project had not been funded, then the previous DEFRA study on potential usage of the square would not be taken any further. Leader funding has helped move the process forward.
- The long term benefits of this project to the local community in terms of social, economic and environmental outcomes provides an opportunity for the village to make use of the square's full potential in a sustainable way.

2.18 Wheelwright's Cottage.

The Business: This is a new husband and wife partnership business with no history of trading. Both partners brought experience of general and

project management, facility and customer service from previous employment. However, neither partner had previous experience of running a tourism accommodation business of this kind.

2.19 The Project: Grant aid was provided to support the renovation and conversion of three small buildings, formally a Wheelwright's and Cartwright's sheds, into a single unit holiday cottage. Plans include the use of biomass and solar heating systems, rain water harvesting and a range of other systems aimed at providing a high level of energy efficiency and sustainability. The works were carried out to a high standard. Support was given for building and ground works, equipment, contaminated land survey and groundwater sampling.

2.20 Key findings:

- The project exhibits a commitment to sustainable tourism through its environmental practices and high quality finish. The project can be used as an example of best practice in sustainable tourism that can help drive up standards within the area. The applicant had fully researched the market and is addressing a demand in the county for self catering accommodation of this type. The project demonstrates the wider benefits of the project exhibiting good links with local suppliers (local materials and builders were used) by sourcing produce (welcome vegetable box etc) from local suppliers and promoting usage of local facilities.
- One FTE has been created and the project is achieving the AONB natural and built heritage objectives by bringing redundant buildings back into economic use.

3. Conclusions

3.1 The above tour provided a helpful insight into how Leader support is addressing some key issues in rural areas – small and micro business support and expansion, local employment creation, community integration, support and encouragement for local produce, and sustainable use and protection of the environment.

3.2 Leader is continuing to support projects across the Kent Downs and Marshes area and will continue to do so until December 2013. There is close liaison with local authority partners to identify and develop projects that fit with local plans and strategies, and address some of the key issues affecting the countryside.

4. Recommendation

4.1 The committee is asked to note the report, discuss any issues that arise from the key findings and provide any suggestions for the future work of the Kent Downs and Marshes Leader Programme.

Author Contact Details: Huw Jarvis
Directorate: Enterprise & Environment

Email: Huw.Jarvis@kent.gov.uk

Tel: 01622 696940

Background Documents:

Map of Kent Downs and Marshes Leader area and identification of project supported.