

**SELEP Rural Sector Working Group (RSWG)**

#### April 1st 2020

#### 10.30 – 12:30

Microsoft Teams – Video Conference

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1. **Welcome and introductions – Graham Peters (Chair)**

Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting. The minutes of the previous meeting were approved.

1. **Rural Strategy and LIS Update – Alex Riley**

LIS Update

Alex Riley noted that this group has been provided with a number of updates on the Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) up to this point. There was not anything significant to note beyond what was discussed at the previous meeting – primarily, that the Strategic Board has endorsed a draft version of the LIS and work is continuing on the document.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, and the resources that this is taking up within central government, it is likely that publication of the LIS document will be delayed until summer 2020, at the earliest.

Rural Strategy

Stuart Gibbons highlighted the overview of the work to date that has taken place with the current Rural Strategy, including the key objectives and workstreams.

The group were asked how they wished to proceed in terms of the approach to a new/refreshed Rural Strategy.

Ross Newham informed the group that government policy for horticulture is a challenge – and was a challenge before the Covid-19 crisis. The ornamental sector is facing significant challenges and there are a number of ongoing labour issues.

Keith Harrison suggested that this group should highlight the successes, particularly the work that this group has promoted to support a more resilient economy.

Beverly Davies noted that the RCCs have offered to review the strategic objectives. Chair agreed that any support would be helpful, and this offer will be taken up.

Nick Johannsen stated that there are particular difficulties in obtaining sound evidence for the rural economy. A highly optimistic scenario would be for SELEP to have a rural evidence base for the South East that is supported by each county. The light touch evidence work that Coast 2 Capital have done is a good starting point.

Kristina Boulden suggested that there should be a future focus on further collaboration with businesses and support on digital marketing and better internet access for rural businesses. As well as a more strategic focus on produce and manufacturing (‘buy local’) so that the economy can be more self-sufficient – such as the work undertaken by Produced in Kent.

It was also noted that the Rural Strategy needs to speak to the climate and biodiversity emergency alongside other important economic issues.

**Action: Alex to scope the viability of funding/ internal resource to start developing an evidence base for the rural economy.**

**Action: Alex to send a request with the minutes for further feedback/ suggestions on a future Rural Strategy.**

1. **Covid-19 - Support for businesses in rural areas**

Chair noted that this would be the most substantive item on the agenda and encouraged as many attendees to provide input in to this item as possible:

Beverly Davies asked that it not be forgotten that not all businesses are covered by Growth Hubs such as village halls that are generating no income at the moment and it is a huge loss to the local area. Keith Harrison reinforced this point, noting that Kent are finding increased demand for support services e.g. rurally located social enterprises, village shops etc., and these areas have experienced the most severe cuts in recent years. For these businesses it is not just about supporting cash flow, vital though that is, or online support, but also face-to-face guidance and networking to exchange good practice. This will be an important longer-term socio-economic infrastructure need.

Michael Valenzia stated that the key thing to go back to government is to make sure that access to cash, so the machine remains oiled, is critical. The NFU and CLA are doing work on this on the understanding that cash flow is the critical concern. Government must relax the bureaucracy on recently released funding.

It was also noted that planning has come to a standstill e.g. no physical signs can go up for planning applications, planning committees not meeting etc.

Floortje Hoette stated that there is an ongoing #helpkentbuylocal campaign with accompanying website that is currently allowing food and drink businesses in Kent to list their business on the website if they are still providing food and drink related services. The hope is that this creates more awareness of local producers and changes the customer mentality in the long-term. The next step will be creating a B2B website that lists the available stock so local retailers can access supplies. As well as potentially a third website that will increase visibility for staffing issues within local businesses. *A press release and link the campaign will be sent out with the minutes.*

**Action: Alex Riley to set up a meeting with Graham, Stuart and Floortje – as well as any other interested partners from Essex and East Sussex – to explore further ways SELEP can assist in the future phases of this work. This will take place as soon as possible.**

From the research perspective, Ross Newham noted that there is a significant worry that industry partners will withdraw from existing contracts as it will no longer be a priority for them.

Caroline Lingham informed that group that there was recently a conference call with the RPA and DEFRA, who are working towards releasing some more detail in the next steps of the process for LEADER grant funds – particularly related to supply issues affecting the completion of projects. Currently completed projects require a physical inspection before funds are paid and they are seeking a change on this regulation.

Deirdre Wells informed the group on the current state of the tourism industry. The tourism sector has been badly hit by the Covid-19 crisis and Dierdre has been working on the Tourism Industry Emergency Response Group. Lots of lobbying has occurred early in the process and this has been successful in terms of specific benefits for tourism and hospitality businesses – the government are being asked to make the definition for these types of businesses as wide as possible. There us new self-employment support which is welcome. The government are also being asked to widen the definition of key workers e.g. to include workers such a zoo staff. Furlough arrangements are currently too rigid, more system flexibility would be welcome e.g. rotating furloughed staff. There may be opportunities for domestic tourism in the recovery phase and work is being undertaken to take advantage of this potentiality.

Nick Johannsen stated that there needs to be more flexibility on Interreg funding, the project and delivery timetable are incredibly rigid at the moment.

Adam Scott noted that the ornamental sector and the food service sector are being particularly affected and feeling immediate pressure. There are some unexpected issues in terms of packaging between wholesale and consumer that need to get ironed out and, hence, trading standards not to be more flexible and tolerant.

Deirdre Wells stated that, currently, there is a mismatch between the stated process for Business Interruption Loans and the experience on the group. Currently legislation necessitates having exhausted all other options. Treasury and the FCA need to ensure more flexibility in terms of access to these loans.

Amanda Corp informed that group that the NFU are launching a ‘pick for Britain campaign’ and met with George Eustice and DEFRA recently. Furloughed workers can participate in this further work provided that their existing contract doesn’t explicitly state otherwise.

Kristina Boulden noted that the key challenges were cash flow, labour supply, sustaining production as certain manufacturers have closed down. It is also proving difficult to get hold of a bank to talk about Business Interruption Loans.

The group noted a number of good existing sources for farm work: labourproviders.org.uk, Concordia, HOPS, Fruitful Jobs, Pro-Force, StudentWorks.

Amanda Corp noted that the above sources are working with the Alliance of Ethical Labour Providers to fill labour shortages, assisting ‘Pick for Britain’ applicants in filling out online applications, doing online interviews and, if successful, allocating individuals to local farms to work on within 2-3 days. The NFU will be sending out more details on this soon ready for the late April/May harvest of asparagus and berries.

The RPA published a statement on the Basic Payments Scheme which is worth noting: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/bps-2020>

Robin Gowers noted significant supply chain issues with restaurants shut, suppliers are struggling to alter their direction towards direct to consumer – with some having to throw away a quarter of their stock as processes are based on ‘just in time’ delivery.

Kristina Boulden stated that she would like to know when businesses can realistically start re-booking accommodation again – there are mixed-messages on this. Can businesses feel safe to promote and push 2021?

Chair informed the group that there are ongoing discussions within SELEP about funding allocations in the short-medium term - both internally and with the Accountable Body. The Growing Places Fund allocation process is currently on hold while this takes place.

1. **RDPE/EAFRD Programme Update**

The RDPE Growth Programme is still ongoing. There has been significant interest in this national funding pot from rural businesses across the SELEP geography and we have seen a substantial number of bids- many of which are of the utmost quality.

The RPA are behind on their assessment processes timetable for Expressions of Interest and have informed the South East Rural Sub-Group (with delegated responsibility form the ESIF sub-committee) that they will no longer be sending EOIs to local priority assessment.

If more information is released on amended application and programme deadlines this group will be informed.

1. **Defra Initiatives to 2028 / Agriculture Bill**

Stuart Gibbons highlighted the stated DEFRA initiatives to 2028 timetable – noting that this will likely be altered somewhat in light of the current situation as it pertains to Covid-19.

The Agriculture Bill is currently at Third Reading stage on a date to be confirmed. The updated version has more references made to food production and food sustainability. Adam Scott noted that the enabling legislation is quite low on detail. One change that NFU is pushing is on food standards – there is no point in maintaining a high bar and then undercutting our domestic markets with imports that have to abide by a lesser standards regime.

1. **Sector Support Fund projects**

Good Food Growth Campaign

The final report was sent through but work to date has been focussed on getting the website, mentioned above, ready. The conference has to be cancelled due to Covid-19.

Skills and Training

Stuart Gibbons informed the group that Dave Stokes has stated the project is still ongoing but little activity is happening at the moment due to Covid-19.

1. **AOB**

Chair stated that a date will be put in the diaries for another meeting in approximately a months’ time and this can be amended, if necessary, closer to the time. **Action: Alex Riley to send a provisional meeting invitation.**