

# RURAL FORUM WORKSHOP

Notes of a meeting held at Swale Borough Council on Tuesday 18 October at 10.45am. Those in attendance were:

Cllr Don Jordan	(Chair, Swale Rural Forum)
Cllr Christine Coles	(Executive Member for Environment, Swale BC)
Mr Paul Cumberland	(Chair, Swale Tourism Association)
Mr Kevin Attwood	(National Farmers Union)
Mrs Maggie Berry	(National Farmers Union)
Mr Kieren Mansfield	(Economic Development Officer)
Ms Lyn Newton	(Tourism Development Officer)
Mrs Tina Grubb	(Notetaker)

Apologies had been received from Cllr Colin Prescott. There was no Kent County Council representative in attendance at the meeting.

## Introduction

Cllr Jordan opened the meeting. The two working groups that had been originally envisaged had been brought together into one to consider both the Swale Economic Development and Tourism Development Strategies. The working group would also consider the specific development of a rural strategy in relation to tourism development.

The Economic Development Strategy had been approved for consultation in September 2005, with comments invited by the beginning of December. A revised draft document is to be taken to the Councils Executive for adoption in January 2006. An action plan will be developed in parallel with the consultation with a view to a consultative draft to be taken to the Executive at the same meeting, with a short consultation period to follow. Thereafter it is the intention that the agreed action plan will take effect from the commencement of the 2006/07 financial year.

The tourism development strategy would be launched in November with facilitated workshops from which key points would contribute to an action plan. The tourism development strategy had been prepared in close consultation with STA through their Chairman.

## General points

Mr Mansfield raised the question of 'How to we define rural?' Kent is an essentially semi-rural county with a number of small/medium towns spread across it; much as is the case in Swale. There is a strong interdependence between town and county particularly in economic terms. This was demonstrated by the employment profile of 'rural residents' within Swale, which reflected the Borough position more generally, the only major exception being people employed in the public sector on the eastern part of Sheppey, where the prison service dominated the local employment market. Statistically rural areas are more affluent and less deprived, with the exception of Leysdown & Warden and Sheppey Central. There are however problems that we all recognise but which are difficult to identify due to the micro-scale at which they exist. This presents difficulties in making effective cases for resource to support rural regeneration.

Cllr Coles asked whether it was possible to extract statistics regarding those claiming housing and Council tax benefits but it was unclear as to whether this was possible due to data protection.

### **Round Table**

Members of the Group introduced themselves and gave a personal perspective on the issues that they wanted to raise as priority areas of action from the Group. The main areas were:

Food (Kentish Fayre)	There was a need to take this opportunity and get the message to the market.
Tourism Bus	Issues about connecting component tourism products to create a better offer. Opportunity to link with Christine Taylor (Rural Projects Officer). Also improve visitor circulation within the Borough.
Festivals	Gap in present Festivals. Was there an opportunity to provide more events that benefit all in the community? Possibility of village consortia promoting events
Accommodation	There was a need to keep people in the area. More quality accommodation required and the rural area was a key sector in development.
Eco-tourism	More walking and cycle ways to be provided to enjoy the area. Woodlands and paths.
Impact of IT	Working from home.

It was also noted that Farming had not been mentioned in either strategies and whilst this was a national issue it was one which was important both directly and in terms of the local environment and the stewardship role played by the farming community.

Cllr Jordan commented on the financial situation; Swale Borough Council was at present undertaking a service review. Hence, there was no likelihood of money available to spend on major projects. Funding would need to come from external sources. However, Ms Newton stressed that this is possible and that the Mid-Kent Downs project had been externally funded and well appointed and would be extended by a further two years. SEEDA had a devolved rural funding pot so this presented further opportunities to tap into external sources.

Mr Attwood commented on the problems facing farmers especially in the arable sector. Farms were only just breaking even and future problems would increase land set aside and the volume of redundant agricultural buildings.

Cllr Coles mentioned coppice woodland in Kent and the extent to which this could be used to benefit the community and economy. The Group felt this was an issue not just for Swale but also for Kent. Cllr Coles felt this was an issue we should pursue in the long-term strategy.

Cllr Coles wondered if it was possible to have information stands at farmers markets to promote small business in the area. However, Mrs Berry pointed out that displaying leaflets at farmers markets was tightly restricted. A discussion regarding farmers markets concluded that these had been in existence for many years, were well established so it was extremely hard to establish significant activity around this. It involved hard work for the farmer with little financial gain. Ms Newton commented that the Council had already piloted farmers markets in Swale with one in Faversham and Sheppey and two in Sittingbourne. They had all been equally successful but it was worth noting that only one producer came from the Swale area, the remainder being from out of the area. Mr Attwood commented that farmers markets were more successful in large centres of population such as London. Mr Cumberland felt that farmers markets needed to reinvent themselves to be successful into the future. Cllr Jordan commented on the long-term plans for Sittingbourne Town Centre and posed the question are we going to put down a dedicated area for markets?

Mr Mansfield commented on the good quality food being served in Swale and that gastro-pubs and similar were a particular strength.

Mr Attwood emphasised the point that there was a danger of a flood of redundant agricultural buildings appearing in Swale and these buildings could be used for workshops and potential office space. The meeting agreed that the Council needed to give thought to putting use into such buildings. Mr Mansfield felt there could be problems with access to farm buildings so there may be highway and transportation issues but there was a balance to be struck. A proactive stance on this issue could place rural Swale in a strong position to capitalise on this.

Cllr Jordan had observed a surge of cottage industries appearing in Bapchild. Mr Mansfield indicated that this was something that he was attempting to measure through available data, across the Borough.

Cllr Jordan commented on the itinerant workers, which were mainly Polish students, being a fundamental part of rural economy. The Group commented on the way this was organised in Swale, which in the main was a very well.

Cllr Coles had spoken to a gentleman working with the travellers/gypsies. There was a lot of work being done nationally regarding their way of life and wondered whether we were missing an opportunity. Ms Newton commented that there are already displays within the grounds of Farming World highlighting the history and trades of travellers.

Ms Newton highlighted the Green Tourism Business Scheme. Along with Ashford and Maidstone, Swale had piloted the scheme free of charge; now it was proving very expensive for small business and could be difficult to sustain alongside the grading and classification schemes. Eight small accommodation providers had been lost in Faversham over the last year. It was hard for small businesses to get their grading for bed and breakfast and to be part of the Green Tourism Business Scheme requiring spend in total around £400. This was neither sustainable nor good business practice for SME's.

Ms Newton outlined flagship projects she was promoting. Eco-tourism – a good project with a North Kent Marshes agenda, which integrated with green rural projects. Flying Start centred on aviation heritage in Eastern Sheppey. There would be a bid for lottery funding and work would be undertaken with the prison service – this was not just a tourism project but also fell under the wider economic agenda.

Mr Mansfield stressed there was limited resource from the Council and the group needed to prioritise its actions. The three main areas of action, which he felt the group needed to consider and prioritise between, were:

- Access and accessibility to employment elsewhere.
- Supporting local communities (the provision of local shops and other services in rural communities).
- Generating new types of employment in rural areas to offer choice to rural residents, communities as well as visitors.

The Group agreed that generating new types of employment (diversification) was the main area to focus on.

### **Action points**

It was agreed that rural areas need to find new income streams and whatever the Rural Forum wished to promote by way of action, it must be sustainable over the long term.

Each Working Group member would provide Mr Mansfield with two actions they feel to be most important within the context of the Economic and Tourism Development by the **28<sup>th</sup> October**.

Ms Newton and Mr Mansfield to develop action plans, with due consideration of the discussion and action points raised.

Amendments to the Economic Development Strategy to recognise role and importance of land based industries.

**21 October 2005**