

Sustainable Farming & Food Action Group – notes from the meeting **Held 19th July 2007, Larkbeare House**

Present:

Tom Langdon-Davis	Chair Devon Towns Forum
Melanie Hall	NFU
Jonathan Smye	Food & Schools Regional Advisor
Lynne Kenderdine	Devon Wildlife Trust
Matt Parkins	Devon Renaissance
Carol Trant	South Hams District Council
Mary Talbot-Rosevear	Small Farms
Jen Anderton	Devon Rural Network
Leanne Crawford	Devon Rural Network

Aim of the Meeting:

- Need to prioritise and focus on achievable actions within the rural strategy for implementation
- There is a proposal that some of the Devon Renaissance pot is used for capacity building, with the employment of a consultant (from a separate fund) to build up sustainable farming and food projects to implementation. There are currently very few projects in this group
- Membership to SFFAG needs to be reviewed – there needs to be a greater representation of private farmers and food producers

Group Direction and Development:

- There is agreement that the role and definition of SFFAG has become blurred. There is a difficulty in translating SERC to farmers and land owners, and informing them how they can access the available money. The employment of a consultant through Devon Renaissance may have the potential to confuse the issue
- There has been a change in process of SFFAG and some evolution from original concept. If farmers can't see the benefit of a SFFAG, they are unlikely to get involved
- SFFAG needs to market itself and be clear on objectives for farming and food
- Devon is going to need some representation with food and farming, but there is a need to consider how this will be done. SFFAG can reform or continue as present but with a different aim. SFFAG needs to decide whether it wants to be seen as an advisory, action or management group. In addition SFFAG will need to continue to be an advisory group for DRN. Needs, aims, and results need to be clarified and focused. It is agreed that SFFAG does have a continued role in contribution towards policy and strategic framework
- Advisory role – need to consider how SFFAG will work with consultant through Devon Renaissance, and establish how involved SFFAG will need to be. *DRN will need to justify the SFFAG group for funding, although the advisory group proposal would be viable in this case due to the highlighted farming knowledge gap.* There needs to be a proposed steering group of a few members which DRN will facilitate
- A slot needs to be retained for SFFAG in DRN, especially as the majority of the Policy Steering Group are not aware of farm and food issues

- The frequency of meetings will depend on the role of the group. It is suggested quarterly for the Advisory Group and a core management group for the consultant who should meet more frequently. It may also be beneficial to have an invited speaker at each SFFAG meeting to increase the existing knowledge/perception base
- Can forestry fit into Food & Farming? Can SFFAG become a land use group? There has never been a proposal to define a forestry role in SFFAG
- SFFAG seems very out of reach for most small scale producers and farmers. The group seems to be largely public sector representatives. SFFAG will have to show clear benefits to private and small scale businesses are they are to become involved. It should be noted that most small businesses don't have the time or ability to release staff to attend meetings
- If SFFAG is to become an advisory group it will need to actively promote its expertise to DCC, RDA etc. It needs to be able to show its achievements for audit
- Devon doesn't have an advisory forum, unlike Cornwall and Somerset. This facility is much needed for knowledge transfer and Devon cannot afford to fall behind
- There needs to be an assessment of the current SFFAG membership. A smaller more focused group need to be created. Consider representatives from:
 - Dartmoor National Park Authority
 - Organic Farming
 - Young Farmers Club – Nick Creasy?
 - South Hams District Council
 - Small Farms
 - Government Office South West
 - South West Forest
 - Bicton College
 - SWREG
 - AgriBIP
 - National Trust
 - Andrew Freemantle – young farmer of the year
 - North Devon District Council– Ellen Vernon
- There is also a definite need to communicate with grass roots and sector people, and consider people that can be pulled in for specific issues, e.g. Natural England
- SFFAG will need to redraft the Terms of Reference before approaching people for membership, and will need to make benefits clear
- Frequency of meetings will be 3 per year, to be held at various venues. If new members are to be invited there needs to be a structured introduction at the start of meetings
- Also consider the possibility of a horticultural angle – possibly Rob Hall. This area is increasing in value, especially with current veg box schemes, e.g. Riverford, gaining popularity
- Consultant Management Group will consist of:
 - Mary Talbot-Rosevear
 - Carol Trant
 - Lynne Kenderdine
 - Jen Anderton
- SFFAG needs to revisit the Rural Strategy and identify what it has achieved beyond development of the SERC bid

- There needs to be a barometer of how the farming and food industry is coping for potential lobbying with respect to future catastrophes i.e. weather disruption to planting and harvest
- SFFAG shouldn't lose sight of the agenda beyond SERC. RDPE will become a significant issue. It is stated that 80% of the overall proposed budget has a designated function and will be delivered through Axis 2 as environmental stewardship, which will account for 80% of this Axis

Devon Renaissance

- There is a possibility that SFFAG could act as a management group for a consultant in place by prioritising their workload and highlighting which projects they should be working on. This post will not be paid for out of £500K pot, but will be taken out of a separate consultancy budget.
- The aim of SFFAG needs to be much more focused before it considers discussing or taking on the management of a consultant. Priorities need to be established.
- It is stated that the main reason for the consultancy work is not to go find projects, but to do the "donkey work" on projects that are already in inception – project facilitation. The person in this post will be networking to see who to talk to and identifying potential projects for funding
- The Devon Renaissance fund has been open since May 2007 (with applications accepted before this date) and only 1 project has been approved so far. There is a total of £500,000 for farming and food allocation, so there is a definite need to push projects much more quickly to ensure project spend
- Money is only available until March 2009 – this is the deadline for money being spent and accountable. It is clear that someone needs to be in the consultancy post as soon as possible
- Time scale for Devon Renaissance application is fairly lengthy. There has to be an initial expression of interest stage, and there are several meetings and management boards that an application must go through before funding can be granted. The whole process can take up to 4 months. Once (if) the expression of interest is approved, the applicant must then submit a full application. Match funding can be up to 50%, with a small allowance for in kind contributions. There is a funding ceiling of £100,000 before a project is referred to the RDA for assessment. Given the timescales involved, it is recommended that projects are planned as pilots.
- There is a need to question why farmers aren't accessing funding – its as much to do with capital and match funding as knowledge and application
- Other potential routes to private or other sources of funding need to be identified if possible
- There is a need to encourage and bring ideas forward if possible – there is a need to make the most of funding the group does have whilst its still available
- There is a definite need to turn project ideas into actual funding applications. Many people need support and hand holding throughout the whole process
- It should be considered that projects may be stronger or more "successful" if small groups of individual businesses came together with the sole aim of bettering and improving produce

- Whilst food Festivals linking producers and hospitality may be a worthy project, the application will need to be adapted to hit Devon Renaissance targets. For example South Hams Food and Drink could be redeveloped due to 18 month delay with first bid over state aid issue
- Previous projects were discussed at the inception of SFFAG with the previous DCC farming co-ordinator Charlie Taylor. In a way the development of Devon Renaissance and the SERC bid took over the group and become its sole reason for existence. SFFAG needs to look at what is wanted by the group, rather than simply developing projects to target pots of money. Some of the initial project ideas seem to have been lost along the way, and discussion around the direction of SFFAG may be a good opportunity to resurrect some of these ideas

NFU

- NFU are now in a position of fine tuning the LEADER and community led development based rural development framework with the RDA and land based sector, including SWCoRE. They will start to look at the development of groups, which is likely to be one per county
- Need to look at South West Food & Drink skills
- Food and Farming has £70 million for supply chain development, knowledge and business support (including SWREG) and capital investment
- Resource management will be funded through Axis 1 (approximately £120K) and account for around 50% of the budget. Other themes will include animal health and risk assessment
- Need to look at how this is delivered and implemented with out replication. It is directed to dovetail into rural development over the next seven years
- There is a huge opportunity for food in schools – the biggest cost to schools is transport. There is a definite need to form links with local farmers. There is only £100K in the Year of Food and Farming pot (SWCoRE is the accountable body for this programme). There also needs to be consideration of seasonality. Any measures need to be targeted at the curriculum. Devon Renaissance money could be used for this as long as there is evidence of links between schools and businesses that worked both ways
- Procurement for schools is slow but is happening
- The agenda for Devon has change again with the key issues currently revolving around pricing (dairy and beef, especially with the current weather); the beef sector is really struggling; cash flow, especially upland farmers based on Dartmoor; environmental legislative policies, especially with respect to pigs, poultry and dairy; climate change; bovine TB; and transition from CAP

Other Projects and Comments

- Need to look at priorities and make sure they dovetail into SWCoRE and Sustainable Farming Board strategy refresh
- SWREG and Taste of the West are already doing some of this work. There is a need to identify further collections of organisations, e.g. Small Farms, Cartwheel, Devon Farms etc, that could also have a role to play in this process

- SWREG has some funding from NFU, They are delivering projects and have also taken on new groups
- Evident holes in the strategy include climate change and resource management. Also need to build in capacity building – farmers need to speak to farmers and come up with their own strategies. There are already some networks and co-operatives in place that could be used for this purpose
- Consider the possibility of using the North Devon Culm example – there is the possibility that SFFAG can tap into the networks that already exist there, particularly in respect of skills, equipment and labour exchange. There is a need to look at a cooperative structure and build links, especially between farm businesses and experience and resources. There may be opportunities in existing projects/networks that SFFAG could extend. There has been a difficulty in registering people with SWREG due to funding uncertainty before March 2007, although this has now been resolved and is secure for the next 7 years
- DCC/Keri Denton – Green Producer Scheme. Tourism and food and drink are the biggest culprits when it comes to the use of ICT and marketing. DCC and SFFAG need to consider looking at the creation of a big umbrella for Devon in terms of IT, marketing and skills. It is acknowledged that there are problems within the process of project planning and implementation, e.g. the requirement to source three quotes when a tried and trusted service provider may be the only viable option for a project – this can cause an unnecessary extension in timescale in project implementation. This scheme could be rolled out across the region if other organisations became involved e.g. South West Food & Drink. The pilot could be used as a role model for future developments and adapted for use by other organisations where necessary
- Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) is currently managing a project on behalf of Natural England based on the biomass sustainable energy statement. DWT have looked at land use capability to see where energy crops could be supported and overlaid with environmental and biodiversity information, along with fuel poverty data. The result will be a GIS package featuring a number of layers to highlight key features. The project is looking to have the maximum gain for wildlife and will include thinking around the approach to farmers and landowners with a complete package. Devon Renaissance (and other) funding could be a stepping stone to the development of such an initiative
- The need for DCC to have a replacement for the farming and food co-ordinator is affirmed – there now appears to be a large knowledge gap for this sector

Dates of next meeting

October 25th 2007 4-6 pm location tbc

January 24th 2007 4-6 pm location tbc