



**Rural Business Group  
Held on Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> July 2009, 10am  
Okehampton Business Centre**

**Present:**

Andrew Lightfoot – Devon Economic Partnership Executive Officer  
Leanne Crawford – Devon Rural Network  
Andrew Butler – NFU  
Phil Wagstaff – Devon Rural Network  
Stewart Horne – West Devon BIP  
Delia Colegate – FSB  
Peter Stacey – Business Link  
Jan Spencer – Community Council of Devon  
Val Baker – Blackdown Hills Business Association  
Lucy Gough – Devon Economic Partnership / Devon Rural Network

**Apologies:**

Jess Whistance – Dartmoor Partnership  
Vanessa Saunders – Torridge District Council

**1) Welcome and Introductions**

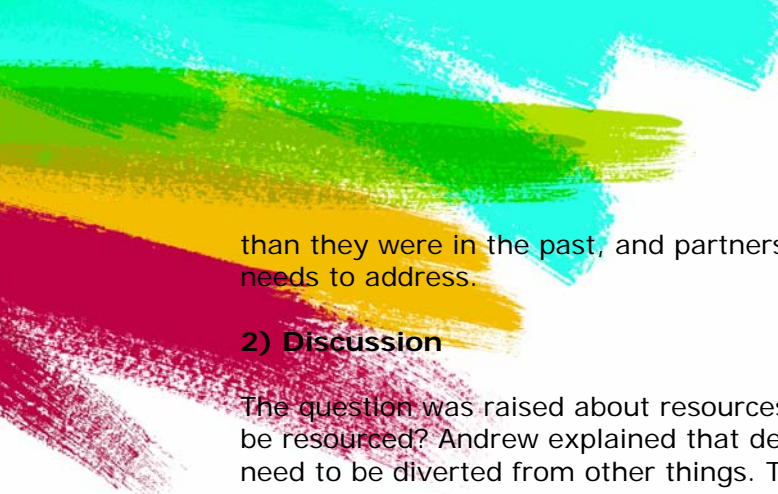
Andrew L welcomed the group and thanked everyone for coming to this initial meeting. Introductions were given around the table.

Andrew L explained that the purpose of the meeting was to have an open discussion looking at whether there is a need for a group to look at rural business issues, in light of the current economic situation. Leanne commented that a lot of requests are being received for information about how rural businesses are faring in Devon. This group would be able to respond to these requests and also feed issues both upwards to regional/national government and downwards to businesses themselves, through member networks.

Phil gave an introduction to the Devon Rural Network (DRN) which was set up in 2001 in the wake of the foot and mouth crisis and as a response to the Haskins report. The aim was to encourage joined up thinking between interested parties, with regards to issues facing rural Devon. The network produces the Devon Rural Strategy and Rural Profile. There is a Policy Steering Group which meets a few times a year and a number of Action Groups covering Farming and Food, Sustainable Tourism, Community and Voluntary sector and Consultation Response. Business has been identified as a gap in coverage and so potentially this group could sit with the DRN as an additional Action Group. For further information visit [www.drn.org.uk](http://www.drn.org.uk)

Andrew L gave an overview of the Devon Economic Partnership (DEP), which comprises public, private and 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations from across Devon, including Plymouth and Torbay. They have produced the Devon Economic Strategy, which has identified 6 strategic priorities. These are being addressed through a number of working groups.

Andrew L stressed that partnership working was a means of encouraging joint working between organisations, and that the importance of this may increase as funding decreases over the next few years. Outcomes are now required more



than they were in the past, and partnerships need clear objectives and clear needs to address.

## 2) Discussion

The question was raised about resources – how would any activity for this group be resourced? Andrew explained that depending on what it was, resources may need to be diverted from other things. Things would be done collectively.

There is currently a lot of support provision for rural businesses, but there is a lack of knowledge among businesses about this support. Reaching people is always a problem and all organisations need to be proactive in their approach. Business engagement is a recurring issue.

### **Business Advice Clinics:**

Peter explained about a series of Business Advice Clinics that are being rolled out across the county, by Business Link and a range of other partners. Business Link was required to set up outreach under their new contract and this is now being set up in all District Council areas. Peter distributed a flyer for clinics being held in West Devon over the next few months.

The partnership is well developed and now they are trying to promote their activity. So far there has been reasonable uptake by a range of businesses, but information about the clinics needs to be more widely distributed.

A number of people around the table – DRN/FSB/BHBA have databases to which they send out newsletters/email updates so information could be distributed through these networks.

**Action: Peter to send details of all clinics currently planned to Lucy so that they can be distributed to the group for wider dissemination.**

Generally the clinics are for established businesses, but they could include start ups if there was sufficient demand. They are looking at 1 day a month in each District, with 4 bookable 1:1 slots on each day, but there is flexibility to increase this if required. There will be provision across the county and people can attend any of the clinics, they are not limited to those in their own District.

The clinics are normally with Business Link advisers but there is a pilot in Teignbridge where reps from South West Manufacturing Advisory Service are also present. Similar clinics could also be held with reps from SW Regional Enterprise Gateway or Train to Gain. Also, there is a County RDPE Development Officer so clinics could be held with her also. There is good potential for co-operation between organisations.

Jan suggested that dedicated clinics could be set up in one village or they could be sector specific.

Peter is not yet aware of any trends relating to issues, but suspects that there will be patterns. This will be something that is looked at and could potentially be shared.

It was generally agreed around the table that whilst the information gathering and diagnostic stages are right, the challenge of brokerage of solutions still remains. The detailed follow up is often not funded and individual projects could provide in depth support, but this needs to be co-ordinated. Peter is aiming to work with delivery partners.



**Action: If anyone has any potential partners/sources of advice that could be brokered – please send them through to Peter ([peter.stacey@blpeninsula.co.uk](mailto:peter.stacey@blpeninsula.co.uk))**

**Potential Lobbying Role:**

Although unable to attend the meeting, Vanessa Saunders suggested a lobbying role for this group, as it could provide a co-ordinated response to issues facing rural businesses in Devon.

Both FSB and NFU have wide lobbying experience. However, for NFU this tends to be mainly at EU or Westminster level rather than at regional or county level.

The DRN has a Consultation Response Action Group, which has rural proofed a number of strategies and policies including the Devon LAA and the Devon Economic Strategy. They also respond to consultations. However, there is a need for this aspect of their work to fully and properly engage with business. This could be the group through which that is done.

**Agricultural Sector Issues:**

Andrew B reported that this sector seems to be lagging behind in terms of feeling the effects of the recession and that there has not yet been a significant increase in issues. However, effects are now starting to be seen as prices have dropped for a number of products including milk, lamb and beef.

Farmers still seem to be able to access finance and are locking into long term fixed rates. However, while this is good for stronger businesses, weaker ones may still have problems.

Andrew L reported that Exeter University have done a report on farm incomes and this suggested that this year would be a peak year and that there would then be decreases until 2012. It is important to remember that within specific sectors there will also be varying issues/responses.

**RDPE:**

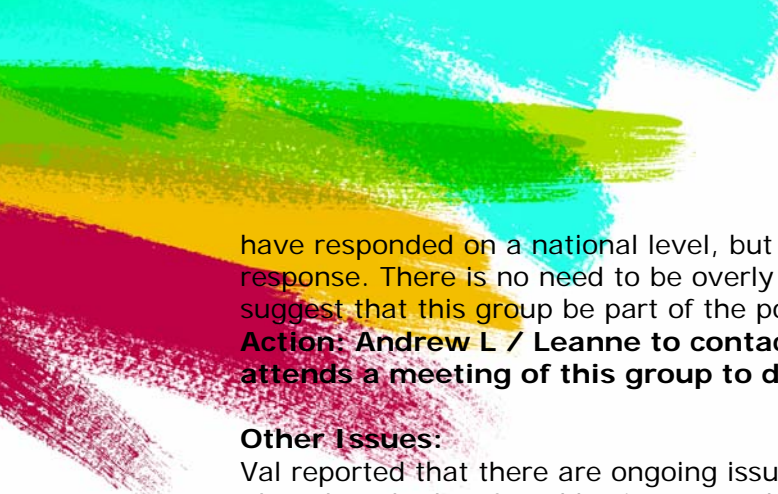
Andrew B reported a general frustration with RDPE on a daily basis. In general, people in the land based sector do not engage well with schemes and having seen problems and delays with this one, they are even further put off. There is a concern that as so far the RDA has spent very little money, there will be a rush to spend it towards the end of the programme and this may end up being in the wrong areas or ways.

Important to remember that RDPE is not solely to benefit the land based sector. There are also community strands, particularly through Local Action Groups, which allow wider engagement. Again, there is a need to ensure that businesses are aware of this.

There is an issue over how information is presented. It must be clear so that people are encouraged to read it.

Andrew L commented that recently members of the DEP Executive met with representatives of the media. They are keen to work in partnership and are interested in positive personal stories. If there can be some about RDPE then this may help to raise its credibility.

However, the credibility gap for the RDPE is currently continuing to widen and there is a potential role for this group to speak to the RDA about this issue. NFU



have responded on a national level, but it would be good to have a county response. There is no need to be overly confrontational with the RDA, but could suggest that this group be part of the potential solution.

**Action: Andrew L / Leanne to contact the RDA and ask that someone attends a meeting of this group to discuss issues around RDPE.**

**Other Issues:**

Val reported that there are ongoing issues with finding appropriate premises. Also, that she has found businesses to be thinking more proactively. Networking events that she organises are now increasingly popular and there was increased interest in being included in the BHBA business directory.

There is also increased interest in markets, although this could be because businesses that were in shops are now using market stalls instead. This is an advantage of small business though – they are more versatile.

There could be the possibility of using vacant shops to advertise dates and locations of markets.

### **3) Next Steps**

In terms of this group, it would be useful to have a virtual network and then meet every so often to discuss certain issues face to face. There is also the potential for audio conferences. This way information can be shared between organisations about particular projects or initiatives.

This group could also serve to identify gaps in available support and to try and provide a more rounded picture of the situation.

There is a need to build the credibility of this group, so it would be good to invite people to attend meetings to discuss particular issues. However, it is important that those we invite to attend are of the right level and that they will be able to go back and do something with the issues that we raise.

Also, we need to ensure that the composition of the group is correct – who else should be attending meetings? Who should be included in the virtual network, but not necessarily attend the meetings?

**Summary of Actions arising:**

- **Peter to send details of all Business Advice Clinics currently planned to Lucy so that they can be distributed to the group for wider dissemination.**
- **If anyone has any potential partners/sources of advice that could be brokered – please send them through to Peter ([peter.stacey@bipeninsula.co.uk](mailto:peter.stacey@bipeninsula.co.uk))**
- **Andrew L / Leanne to contact the RDA and ask that someone attends a meeting of this group to discuss issues around RDPE.**