

24 January 2008

SOUTH WEST REGIONAL RDPE IMPLEMENTATION GROUP MEETING

24 January 2008 – SWRDA Offices, Sterling House, Exeter

Minutes of meeting

Present:

Andrew Slade – Chair, GOSW
Paul Shand - GOSW
Tim De-Winton – Environment Agency
Matthew Woodcock – Forestry Commission
Peter Hardaker – Cornwall Agricultural Council
Steve Marston – Natural England
Paul Clark - SWRDA
Rob Hatt - SWRDA
Lucy Macaulay – Secretariat, Natural England

Presentations by:

Phil Tolerton – Natural England
John Waldon – SW Uplands Federation

Apologies – Ian Piper, Gerry Hamersley, Phil McVey

Welcome and Introductions

Approval of minutes from 27 November 2007 –SWRDPERIG/162007

Minutes of the 27 November 2007 meeting were approved subject to two amendments.

Delivery partner updates

Natural England update from Steve Marston – SWRDPERIG/322008

1. Programme approval resulted in seven changes to Environmental Stewardship. Natural England has started to identify those projects which have already been approved but fall short of the new criteria. NE advisers continue to work with those applicants to bring them up to the required threshold.
2. The change introduced to fund traditional farm building restoration and maintenance will be through Axis 3 rather than Axis 2. The aim is to link such activity with the commercial re-use of a building rather than simply restoring and maintaining traditional farm buildings. Rob Hatt suggested this might not be a major issue for the South West due to the nature of our traditional agricultural buildings. Andrew Slade asked whether English Heritage had been consulted.

Action: Tim De Winton to discuss with Liz Bailey from English Heritage.

3. The Group asked whether there was an issue with the current 6% spend for the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. Steve reported that NE expects the majority of claims will be processed by the RPA in the final quarter. Steve also reported that for year 2008/09 Agri-environment schemes are already 92% committed.

4. Rob suggested that the first and second changes made to ES listed in the NE update paper will require close working between SWRDA, NE and EA to fully maximise the opportunities for resource management activity under the new Programme.

5. The Group asked what the potential was for 'special projects' to deliver better outcomes for e.g. the Uplands.

Action: GOSW to raise the question of special projects with Defra at the next Uplands meeting.

Action: NE to report back to the next RIG on how the changes to ES have been received in the region.

Energy Crops, woodfuel and their markets – SWRDPERIG/272008

Action: the Group to pass any questions or issues on the paper back to Simon Trehane, Adrian Jowitt and Mark Prior

6. The Group questioned whether the Government's aspiration of 60,000 ha of energy crops planted over the next 5 years was realistic. NE has received relatively few expressions of interest for the new Energy Crops Scheme. The Group acknowledged that rising grain prices was making planting Energy Crops less attractive.

7. The Group agreed that emerging issues within the region should be fed back to Defra to help test the Department's approach to Energy Crops.

Action: Paul Shand and Andrew Slade to raise the Energy Crops issues with Defra.

8. The Group asked if the opportunity mapping work led by NE was now complete.

Action: Steve Marston to follow up with Natural England colleagues and report back to the next RIG.

9. Rob explained that the SW RDAs focus for Energy Crops would be on woodfuel with a view to supporting growth of the supply chain within the forestry Sector (including woodland waste).

The focus of support under the new Programme would be on demand side rather than supply side measures. .

10. Matthew Woodcock reported that the Forestry Commission in the South East had produced a document highlighting the opportunities for the forestry sector under RDPE. Rob suggested this document would complement the work recently commissioned by the SW FC to look at opportunities for the forestry sector.

Action: Matthew Woodcock to circulate the South East FC document.

11. Paul Shand suggested the planned NE led publicity campaign would need to be alive to all opportunities under the various strands of the Programme.

Forestry Commission Update

12. Now the Programme has been approved the focus for FC is on ensuring those that have live agreements submit their claims in the current financial year. The 2007/08 budget stands at £3.6m. Matthew reported a potential underspend of around £400k.

13. Matthew reported the EU definition of a farmer is causing problems within the region and is in turn holding up planting.

14. Protecting and enhancing SSSI's remain a priority for the Forestry Commission.

15. Steve Marston said he had received positive feedback about recent farm demonstration events. Matthew added that FC was keen to foster joint working between the delivery partners to demonstrate areas of best practice.

South West Regional Development Agency Update – SWRDPERIG/312008

16. The SW RDPE would officially launch on 4th February to coincide with the launch of the SW Competitiveness Programme. The SW RDA prospectus for RDPE would be launched at this event.

17. SWRDA Board has given approval for up to £2m to be made available to allow the current SW Rural Enterprise Gateway (SW REG) contract to extend for a further 12 months (pending re-procurement). The current contract is due to expire at the end of March 2008. The Business Support Simplification Programme would impact on the delivery of Axis 1 and Axis 3, with SW REG becoming the gateway and brokerage service for businesses receiving support under RDPE.

18. Rob explained that the commissioning process would be used to procure projects relating to each of the investment themes.

Four projects are currently in the process of being commissioned: SW REG extension, an Animal Health and Welfare programme, Sustainable Rural Tourism framework programme and a social enterprise gateway. Further projects and programmes which relate to the investment themes would be developed at a later date. Under RDPE the commissioning process would involve stakeholders in drawing up the detailed specifications. The RDPE prospectus sets out the overall strategy and proposed activity. The Group thought that it would help members to understand the process better if a map or diagram could be produced which sets out the various stages of the commissioning process for each investment theme, including: where we are now and what has happened to date, the level of resources allocated to each investment and who the lead person is, and plans for the next stage. This is what would allow the group to address any specific issues arising. The Chair asked for this map/grid to be produced for the next meeting.

Action: SW RDA to develop a process map/diagram for Axis 1 and 3

RIG Reporting – SWRDPERIG/332008

19. Paul Shand explained the aim of the RIG reporting arrangements was to give the Group a strategic overview of the Programme, highlighting critical issues, barriers to success/threats and areas of underperformance, as well as good news/success stories. The aspiration was for reporting to capture information already available and to avoid duplication.

20. Defra has indicated that regions would be asked to provide a regular update to the PMC on progress. How this is done would be for regions to decide. National arrangements to report back to Defra on Axis 2 are more or less in place but arrangements for Axis 1 and Axis 3 are still in development.

21. Rob said that he endorsed the principles set out in the paper but suggested the way in which delivery partners report may need to vary slightly, for example to pick up different approaches to targets and outputs.

22. The Group agreed they were broadly content with the approach set out in the paper but recognised further work was needed to align arrangements with Defra's and delivery partner requirements.

Action: Group members to send Paul comments on his paper by Friday 8 February 2008.

Action: Paul to work with Defra and delivery partners to refine the templates to be used for the next meeting.

Local Action Update – Paul Clark ref: SWRDPERIG/342008

23. Paul Clark provided a summary of the expression of interests received for Local Action. In total 35 expressions had been received, requesting a total of £87 million compared to £28million allocated for Axis 4. The quality of proposals varied.

At one end of the spectrum there are examples of highly developed partnerships with notable experience of delivering European Programmes; at the other end 3 of the 35 appear to be ineligible.

Action: Paul to circulate an electronic copy of his paper.

24. Paul thanked Natural England and Forestry Commission colleagues for their detailed comments on the expressions. He is now in the process of pulling together all comments to feedback to applicants.

25. To support applicants develop full bids, SWRDA will run a series of workshops in February.

Action: Paul to circulate relevant workshop materials to the Group

26. Paul said that membership of the Regional Selection Panel would need to be agreed fairly soon and dates booked in diaries. Sir Harry Studholme had agreed to chair the selection panel. GOSW would be represented to observe the process and ensure EU and Defra requirements are met. It is expected that as a minimum the delivery partners and EA would also be represented.

27. Tim De Winton suggested inviting Sustainability South West (SSW) to be involved in the panel to help test the sustainability of the bids.

Action: Andrew Slade, Paul Shand and SW RDA to discuss further the possible involvement of SSW in the process, including feedback on proposals.

28. The group agreed that anyone involved in the technical assessment of Local Action bids should not be involved in the final selection.

Action: SW RDA to draw up a list of panel members for the RIG to consider and begin to hold possible dates in diaries.

29. Rob mentioned that the SW RDA Board would need to sign off the final decision to award funding. Having Sir Harry chair the panel would help the process of reaching final sign off. Andrew reiterated that the selection panel would make decisions on behalf of the RIG and that all parties represented on the RIG would therefore need to support the final decision.

30. Steve Marston said that overall he had been disappointed by the links made in the expressions of interest to the environment as an economic driver and the potential for synergy across the axes. Rob said that the workshops and feedback would help to address the issue. 'Harnessing wider economic value from sustainable environmental quality' would also be a part of the criteria for selecting successful LAGs. The Group was clear that a joined-up approach across the axes would be a key criterion for selection

31. The Group thanked Paul C and Bruce Douglas their work on the process so far.

Creating new woodland – Matthew Woodcock – SWRDPERIG/292007

32. Matthew Woodcock introduced his paper. He stated that support for forestry is now targeted at delivering a range of public benefits and that for the South West region the priority was the use of existing woods rather than the creation of new woods.

33. Support for woodlands under the new programme is also about delivering and buying public benefits. In terms of new woodland creation there are opportunities from targeting habitat creation, green infrastructure and flood management.

Action: Matthew to review the latest draft of the RIP to ensure it reflects priorities and opportunities for the regions woodlands.

Environmental Stewardship Targeting

34. Phil Tolerton delivered a presentation on the ES review and NEs approach to spatial targeting.

Action: Lucy to circulate Phil's presentation slides.

35. The aim of the review was to ensure ES delivers more for the Environment. At present there was an exceptionally high bar for HLS while ELS remains at a much lower/basic level. This leaves a big gulf between the two schemes and the outcomes they deliver. The review is likely to result in new ELS options, changes to many of the HLS options and the introduction of a new Climate Change theme. Defra has already signalled that a new entry level scheme will be introduced for Upland Farmers. The Group noted that certain capital items were fundable under the HLS proposals.

36. 50% of ELS agreements come up for review in 2010 which provides an ideal opportunity to target the schemes. Due to the review, NE would no longer actively promote ELS.

37. The new system will use data and evidence to develop a spatial approach – the aim being to give 'greater geographical literacy' – to allow NE plan which geographic areas and key themes to target in order to deliver the scheme objectives. Maps would be developed to highlight priority areas to help target HLS.

38. Stakeholders would be involved in developing the spatial targeting approach. NE aim to implement the new approach during September 2008 and go live the following month.

Action: RIG to feedback to NE examples of exemplar projects that demonstrate synergy across the Programme priorities.

39. The Group welcomed the work underway, and endorsed the direction of travel.

South West Uplands – John Waldon, SW Uplands Federation – SWRDPERIG/282008

40. John had been invited to present to the Group following the initial meeting of the SW Uplands Task Force. He explained the background to the SW Uplands Federation and introduced his paper. He explained that he had already received feedback from Simon Trehane on the points raised around RDPE.

Action: SW RDA to circulate Simon's note

41. In addition to the points raised in John's note he stressed that the South West Uplands contain around 10% of the Nations scheduled ancient monuments. They also include many SSSIs, SACs and 300 sq miles of public access.

42. John reported that Hill farmers are now saying that moorland farms have seen their profits significantly decline (costs are outstripping their income). Many are thinking of leaving agri-environment schemes and only a fraction have taken out new ELS agreements and even smaller numbers have HLS agreements.

Action: John to expand the points at item 9 on his paper for the next meeting of the Uplands Task Force.

43. The Group agreed that there was a real issue around negative perceptions among Uplands farmers of RDPE and ERDP which help explain lower ES take up. Many opportunities exist under RDPE but extra effort would be needed to communicate the right messages.

44. Rob commented that Axis 1 under RDPE was focused on improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sectors. The focus would therefore be on promoting long-term sustainability of these rural businesses. Elements of Axis 1 and 3 benefit Upland farmers, in particular business support and skills development under Axis 1 and Local Action, a sustainable rural tourism project and farm diversification support under Axis 3. Rob pointed out that SW RDA had received expressions of interests from groups looking to set up local action groups in the Uplands. He suggested that these groups will need to carefully consider the feedback from SW RDA and may well benefit from input from the Federation.

45. John mentioned that a small group from the Federation would meet Simon Trehane again in the near future. It was suggested that this gathering should also include NE and EA.

Forward look and review of action points – SWRDPERIG/302008

Action: RIG members to check the action points document circulated and to forward amendments to Lucy no later than Friday 8 February.

Communication and stakeholder engagement

46. Paul Shand reported the Communications and Stakeholder Engagement Task and Finish Group met the previous week. The main focus for the group to date had been the launch of the Programme. The group would look for opportunities to promote joint working and synergy across the Programme. Future meetings will trail the RIG meetings and pick up any communications/stakeholder engagement issues.

47. Rob reported the SW RDA would be leading the official launch of the SW Programme. The launch would take place on the 4th February to coincide with the launch of the SW Competitiveness Programme. The event was intended to be low key.

48. Rob said that the communication message was complicated because the Axis 2 elements are already up and running but Axis 1 and 3 are new. A press notice will be issued. Paul Shand said that he was liaising with Ben Bradshaw's office over a quote to include in the press notice that emphasises the size of funding coming into the region and partnership working.

Action: Paul Shand to connect on the press release

Action: SW RDA to circulate the press notice prior to launch

49. Rob said that as part of the launch Sir Harry Studholme would give a presentation highlighting the high level objectives for the Programme. The SW RDA Prospectus for RDPE and the SW RDPE Web Portal would be launched as part of the event. The website should go live on the morning of 4 February. The Chair emphasised the need for a joined-up approach, reflecting the broad-based partnership approach to delivering the Programme in the SW.

Action: SW RDA to circulate the prospectus, the link to the Web Portal and the presentation slides prior to launch

50. Rob mentioned that the SWRDA was looking for opportunities to explain what it is the organisation is trying to achieve through RDPE. He said that the county shows offer an opportunity to do this in a joined up way by bringing together stands. Steve informed the group that Natural England will not be attending any of the shows. Matthew said that FC had already booked a stand at some shows and there is potential to join forces.

Action: NE, FC, and SW RDA to explore joint communications at the shows

Any other business

51. Peter Hardaker reported that the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Partnership Group would meet on 31 January 2008. Invitations have been issued.

Action: Peter Hardaker to circulate a list of invitees to the RIG.

52. Paul Shand reported that Defra and Government Offices had agreed to finalise the latest version of RIPs by the end of February. For the SW this means very little additional work as Paul Clark, Paul Shand and Simon Trehane have revised the RIP to reflect recent developments. Paul Clark and Paul Shand will make a few more amendments before the document is circulated to the group for comments. Once comments have been incorporated the RIP will be circulated one last time before it is submitted to Defra.

Action: Paul Shand to circulate the RIP for comments.

Date of next meeting: 22nd April 2008