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SEMINAR REPORT

'THE ROLE OF ESTATES IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT'. ALNWICK GARDENS, TUESDAY 26TH APRIL 2007.

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This Northern Rural Network[1] event was staged to discuss the North East Rural Estates Framework pilot project. Presentations were given by representatives of the organisation responsible for initiating the project (One North East (ONE)), for running it (Tyne Team) and from two participating estates (Meldon and Blanchland). These were followed by two presentations about successful rural estate diversification schemes completed before the Rural Estates Framework pilot began (Allendale and Eshott) and a presentation on the effect of planning regulations on rural diversification schemes (Neil Robson, Ward Hadaway). The final presentation examined the future of Business Link (Nicki Clark).

Background to the North East Rural Estates Framework pilot project

This seminar reported on a 12 month study (that ended in March 2007) designed to identify new ways of providing support to rural estates. The project followed a smaller study which suggested that rural estates were "central to the regeneration of many north east settlements and that estate owners were well placed to take the lead role in this process if suitably supported by public money and expertise" (Forum for the Future 2006; p. 13). It is supposed that participating estates would be helped to improve their performance and in so doing help achieve rural development agency objectives, many of which overlap their own, for example ensuring a strong rural economy, raising employment, achieving a vibrant and sustainable rural community, affordable rural housing, reduced environmental damage and the delivery of more public goods. Further, it would examine what benefit estates might derive from introducing 'one-stop shops' through which all business support in the region could be accessed.

Four rural estates participated initially, with three more joining during the year. Each estate was audited using a previous tested Performance Toolkit designed to establish a register of assets (human, financial and community) and to bring together the views of the development agency, the estate managers and the estate's community. The appraisal formed the basis of a Settlement Action Plan which in turn was used to identify funding requirements and potential sources of funds available to address specific issues. The last step in the pilot was the signing of an agreement (a memorandum of understanding) between relevant parties that would commit them to work together in an active and progressive partnership.

1. The Northern Rural Network was established in 2000 and includes over 600 Rural development practitioners from across the North of England. More details of its activities are discussed in Ward et al. (2005).

Seminar summary - key points

Frances Rowe (ONE) suggested the principle benefits of the pilot to ONE was in enhancing its understanding of the work of rural estates, and in offering ONE a chance to educate rural estates about its own activities. Rural estates could be engaged using the Performance Toolkit designed to assist the estate develop a strategic plan. And whilst no memoranda of understanding had been signed there was an expectation they would be shortly.

Representatives of two participating estates commented that the Performance Toolkit had indeed assisted them in developing/updating their estate strategic plan. However, this appeared to be the only ‘hard’ gain from the project, other benefits being best categorised as ‘soft’; for example increased dialogue, better understanding of each other’s roles and activities and learning to share common goals. We were informed that estates suffered a series of hardships, including weak cash flow, and a continuous battle with planners and planning policy that hindered the development of the long-term financial sustainability of the estate: a necessary precursor to a vibrant rural economy and community. Whether the project had altered policy to address any of these more difficult issues was not revealed.

One participating estate manager summarised his experiences as “interesting and frustrating”, the other as “time consuming” though the Performance Toolkit provided an easy template once in place for updating: it has already led to a plan to increase public access and the development of a ‘community group’. Both agreed sharing information assisted the delivery of mutual objectives (between estate, community and public delivery bodies) allowing the “sum of the whole to be greater than that of the individual parts”, but both wished to know how the project would be developed in the future – and were disappointed that closure had not been achieved via signing memorandum of understanding.

There was no attempt to deliver a cost-benefit appraisal or time-budget to formally value or appraise the net public and private benefits of participating in the pilot study.

There followed three presentations, two on examples of diversification managed by rural estates and a clear account of the planning regulations as they apply in rural areas. Unfortunately these took the focus of the meeting away from the rural estates project, but did remind us of the types of hurdles and barriers faced by rural estates. For example, barriers faced for a conversion of a farmstead into offices included,

- time take from idea to completion (the successful example that was discussed took 7 years from inception to completion), largely due to complex planning regulations and overcoming hurdles to access government grants;
- cost of accessing government grants;
- complying with building regulations;
- creating sufficient income opportunities to pay for the infrastructure

costs on the site.

These and other planning barriers and hurdles were, therefore, well known prior to the start of the rural estate project; how the pilot scheme had already contributed to addressing these barriers was not discussed.

Future of the Project

Several participants asked about the future develop of the project: what was intended - if anything - to continue or develop it. That rural estates and public bodies had some overlapping aims and objectives appeared sufficient justification to those present to roll-out the project across England and Wales: others might consider this co-incidence of objectives insufficient justification for spending public money. This important question was not discussed. Reports, and an assessment of the project by Westley Consulting, were still under consideration – the Westley Consulting assessment would have made an informative presentation!

It is clear that all participants derived some value from participating, but as yet nothing besides a commitment to sign memorandum understandings was decided: and this represents closure of the pilot project rather than a further development. Among suggestions offered for future development was a need to appoint a champion among the various public bodies with a role in rural development to drive and monitor the development of a larger-scale project, and that each public body with an involvement in rural issues should deposit its funds into a single pool of money from which grants etc. could be drawn.

Concluding Comments

The project showed a need to develop a fuller, two way dialogue between rural estates and regional and national decision makers to allow the former to influence the latter and the latter to understand better the aims, aspirations and activities of the former. This learning process offered potential benefits to both sides, but required trust and openness. Both can be established by a track record of delivery built up over time, but this is generally a long-term process. I doubt that the pilot project was of sufficient duration to allow trust to be developed.

The potential benefits to agriculture are clear: as voluntary modulation increases, the rural development (pillar 2) budget will grow, and as this is not ring-fenced to agricultural businesses, agriculture needs representation to influence programmes. It is for this reason, together with the prospect of creating efficient 'one-stop shops' for more effective delivery of rural support and assistance programmes that rural estates need to participate in projects of this nature. Agriculture needs to find as many ways as possible to influence the Rural Development Program England (RDPE), and this two-way education process is one way of doing so.

Other than this, however, there was little evidence that the project had identified any problems not already in the public domain - or that the project had altered regional and national policy. One was left with a feeling that the project was more about "walking the policy chain" (paralleling the important "walking the food chain" initiative that was established by the Food Chain Centre some years ago). However, the cost of participating (man hours, travel, meetings etc) was not discussed, and the failure to close the project with the timely signing of memorandum of understandings hardly convinces that the project has the full support of the development agency. Maybe it simply shows once again the difference in the importance of timeliness between successful bureaucracies and successful farm businesses.

Further, the lack of any clear proposals for future developments of the project suggests a lack of support. Whether such schemes do actually deliver benefits is the acid test; it was hard to see from this seminar that many concrete benefits had accrued. But a year is insufficient time to develop trust and agreements on how to deliver on these complex issues. It normally takes longer for trust and reciprocity, learning and understanding, and common interests to conquer an overwhelming instinctive unwillingness to co-operate which may result in rural estates, public officers, communities and public organisations needing to work differently.

References

Forum for the Future (2006) Rural Estate Sustainability: Leading by Example. 9 Imperial Square, Cheltenham.

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About the author

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