

The Rural Economy

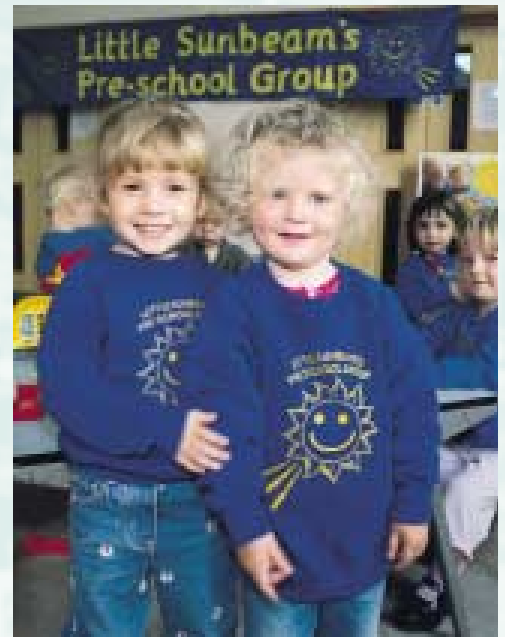
1999-2001

Introduction

The Regional Economic Strategy (RES) identified four key priorities for the region's rural economy:

- support for the land based sector – particularly through new opportunities – diversification, rural tourism and local produce
- support for rural businesses
- support for rural communities
- disseminating best practice

Since these rural priorities were identified, the needs of the region's rural economy have been sharply highlighted as a consequence of the Foot and Mouth crisis. This has called for close partnership working and co-ordinated delivery of support. The hallmark of the rural economy is the existence of many organisations and agencies working across the spectrum of activities undertaken in rural areas. SEEDA has established a cohesive rural network of partners co-ordinating the efforts of the public, private and voluntary sectors to deliver the first Rural Strategy for the South East.



Herstmonceux Hall – This £400,000 redevelopment was one of 16 projects supported by SEEDA, providing rural services in East Sussex.

Key Facts

- The South East has 11 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and 1 Heritage Area which cover 32% of the region – more than any other English region
- One third of England's meadows and lowland heaths are in the South East
- Around 24% of businesses are situated in rural areas
- Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing contribute more than £900 million to the region's economy

One of SEEDA's key priorities is sustaining the region's environmental heritage – 32% of the landscape in the South East is designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Some of SEEDA's specific initiatives to support the Rural Economy are:

◆ Farm Diversification Grants

Available since April 2000 across the region, the principal aim is to support farm diversification by using redundant buildings to raise additional income to enable more viable farm businesses. SEEDA has supported over 40 such projects providing many additional benefits to the surrounding communities.

Outputs

- 320 projects supported since SEEDA was established
- Over 133 businesses assisted since the Foot and Mouth crisis
- 660 jobs created/safeguarded since 1999
- Six new farmers' markets have already been supported by SEEDA

◆ Rebuilding the Rural Economy

As part of the RES, SEEDA has established a programme of measures to support a recovery among the many sectors of the rural economy. SEEDA has held a series of major rural events on rural tourism, local produce and woodland regeneration. The current programme of seminars includes a series on planning, with SEEDA working together with the Countryside Agency, DEFRA, and the South East England Regional Assembly. SEEDA has also carried out various research projects to establish the future of local abattoirs, the availability of cold stores to support rural produce and farmers' markets, and the potential for alternative energy using chestnut coppice.



Woodland Enterprise Centre, Flimwell, East Sussex. SEEDA is co-funding this site which offers space for office and education facilities for woodland related industries in the the South East region.



Turner's Hill, West Sussex SEEDA's rural diversification programme allocated more than £704,000 to 36 farms during 2000/1.

◆ Market Towns

Responding to the challenges in the Rural White Paper, SEEDA established with the Countryside Agency a new Market Towns Fund. The programme will deliver a comprehensive regeneration programme for up to 10 towns in the region.

◆ Small and Medium Sized Enterprise (SME) Assistance

SEEDA has invested £1 million to provide individual grants to the businesses most affected by Foot and Mouth disease. This funding has supported the survival of 133 businesses and safeguarded more than 450 jobs in key sectors of the rural economy. Additional funding has been given to provide specific advice to businesses facing cash flow difficulties. This advice has been provided through the region's six Business Links.

◆ Rural Tourism

The tourism sector has faced a series of crises, with floods, Foot and Mouth disease and more recently the terrorist threat, all of which have reduced visitor numbers to the countryside.

As part of the recovery, SEEDA has undertaken a major marketing, information and PR campaign co-ordinated through the Tourist Boards and designed to attract visitors back to the countryside.

In addition, there have been a number of other initiatives aimed at improving the competitiveness of tourism SMEs, including those in rural areas. These include two projects to increase use of ICT by small hotels and guesthouses, one in Kent and the other region wide. SEEDA is also developing a pilot project in the Isle of Wight to develop a business planning pack for small enterprises engaged in tourism.

◆ Local Produce

The quality landscapes of the South East are maintained and managed by farmers. Many of them are dependent upon a very fragile livestock sector. SEEDA had already identified problems with the lack of infrastructure for the local food supply chain and Foot and Mouth has led to the closure of the region's only export abattoir. A major Livestock Revival Plan is being developed with the industry to identify what actions need to take place.

SEEDA has also been actively engaged with partners to significantly increase the number of farmers' markets across the South East

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