

Shanklin, Isle of Wight, one of the market towns selected for SEEDA's support.  
(Photograph courtesy of the Southern Tourist Board).



## Introduction

The needs of the region's rural economy and the interdependence between the various business sectors was sharply highlighted by the Foot and Mouth crisis in 2001.

SEEDA also plays a key role in working with major partners such as DEFRA and the Countryside Agency, helping develop rural policy, influencing to ensure a rural dimension to the work of a wide range of organisations, raising the profile of rural issues across the region and the dissemination of best practice. SEEDA has established a cohesive rural network of partners co-ordinating the efforts of the public, private and voluntary sectors. SEEDA has a dedicated rural Board Committee to advise the rural Board Member.

The Regional Economic Strategy (RES) identified three key priorities:

- Support for rural-based businesses;
- Specific support for the land sector particularly through new opportunities, diversification, rural tourism and local produce;
- Support for rural communities – market towns and communities in the more deprived parts of the region.

The newly built Sedlescombe Village Hall, is part of SEEDA's rural economy and renaissance programme.



SEEDA is supporting a Livestock Revival Action Plan.



### Key Facts

- The region has a large rural area – 2 million people live in the regions rural areas;
- The region has more than 160 small rural towns with a population of less than 20,000 and more than 1,400 villages;
- Around 24% of businesses are situated in rural areas;
- The South East has 11 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and one Heritage Area which cover 32% of the region – more than any other English region. Two of them, The New Forest and The South Downs are set to become the first National Parks in the South East;
- One third of England's meadows and lowland heaths are in the South East;
- The four most wooded counties are in the South East (Surrey, Hampshire, East Sussex and West Sussex);
- Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing contribute more than £900 million to the region's economy.

### Outputs

- 394 Projects supported since SEEDA was established;
- 511 Jobs created 476 jobs safeguarded;
- 758 Rural based businesses assisted;
- 745 Training opportunities;
- 10 New community building projects supported;
- 26 Projects supporting local produce supported;
- 46 New bed spaces created on farms;
- 115 New childcare places created;
- 49 Redundant buildings brought back into productive use.

A SEEDA Farm Diversification Grant has been used to further support the development of local meat products. Livestock Farmer, Peter Lingham (centre), who farms on the North Downs in Medway, has converted a redundant dairy parlour to provide a cutting room for meat preparation and a sales area. (Photograph courtesy of the Kent Messenger).



### **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 22 such projects that now provide benefits to the surrounding communities through local job opportunities in offices and workshops, new bed and breakfast businesses, farm shops and nursery school places.

#### **◆ 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. A series of planning seminars, working with the Countryside Agency, DEFRA and the Regional Assembly has highlighted the major changes that will need to be accommodated as a result of the restructuring of the land-based sector. 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.

#### **◆ Small and Medium Sized Enterprise (SME) Assistance**

SEEDA has supported projects to provide advice and skills development to rural businesses based in the priority rural areas. More than £1 million was provided in individual grants to the businesses most affected by Foot and Mouth Disease. This funding supported the survival of more than 150 businesses and safeguarded more than 500 jobs in key sectors of the rural economy. Additional funding has also been given to provide specific advice on cash flow to more than 180 businesses facing cash flow difficulties. This advice has been provided through the region's six Business Links and advice is continuing well into 2002.

SEEDA has supported a rural Enterprise Hub at Horticultural Research Institute at East Malling in Kent and Enterprise Gateways are developing in the small market town of Faringdon in Oxfordshire, with others in the pipeline centering of food and woodlands. Skills training has been delivered to businesses in priority areas, with specific focus on tourism, the woodland and food sectors.

Romsey Tourist Information Centre, in Test Valley Borough Council, connects up the SEEDA-funded VISIT service.



#### ◆ Rural Tourism

The tourism sector has faced a series of crises, with floods, Foot and Mouth disease and the terrorist threat, all of which have reduced visitor numbers to the countryside. As part of the recovery SEEDA has supported a major marketing campaign co-ordinated through the Tourist Boards designed to attract people back into the countryside and raising the profile of distinctiveness of different parts of the region and the rich wealth of heritage and culture. In addition, there have been an number of other initiatives, aimed at improving the competitiveness of tourism SME's, such as improved use of ICT by small hotels and guesthouses, provision of business planning packs for small enterprises engaged in tourism. 'Welcome to the Farm' has been supported as well as direct help through diversification grants to provide additional self-catering and Bed and Breakfast places on farms across the region.

Following the Rural White Paper, the SEEDA Tourism Sector Group, together with the Countryside Agency, has prepared the first steps towards the development of an Action Plan for Rural Tourism in the region.

#### ◆ 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 has already identified problems with the lack of infrastructure for the local food supply chain. Foot and Mouth led to the closure of the region's only export abattoir. A Livestock Revival Action Plan has been developed by the industry sector, led by SEEDA, and its recommendations are now being taken forward. SEEDA is also helping groups of producers to work together linking growers, processors and local outlets, as well as supporting initiatives to increase the number of farmers markets across the South East.

One of SEEDA's sustainable development programmes - the wood pellet renewable energy boiler supplies the Betteshanger Colliery administration building with heat and hot water.

Barham School, near Canterbury, Kent, one of SEEDA's rural projects linking IT with education.



#### ◆ Woodlands and Renewable Energy

The Woodland Enterprise Centre is being developed in East Sussex, as a centre for the woodland industry in the Weald. Work is developing on the regeneration of coppice in the region to provide renewable energy. SEEDA is supporting the development of energy through TV Energy in the Thames Valley and new networks of potential suppliers are being investigated.

#### ◆ Communities in the More Deprived Areas of the Region

Parts of East Sussex, the Isle of Wight and parts of Kent are identified as areas where there is a concentration of deprivation. SEEDA has supported 245 projects to support communities in these areas. A co-ordinated approach is led by local Rural Partnerships and projects have tackled a range of issues and delivered integrated support to both social and economic regeneration. Projects have created new jobs through the use of redundant buildings. Other projects have offered support to businesses through advice and training, supported people to improve basic skills and ICT, created new childcare places, provided new or improved rural services and also developed local community buildings, particularly village halls which provide opportunities for local outreach services.

Ventnor, Isle of Wight - a seaside town selected for SEEDA's support.  
(Photograph courtesy of the Southern Tourist Board).



#### ◆ Market Towns

Responding to the challenges in the Rural White Paper, published in 2002, SEEDA has established with the Countryside Agency a new Market Towns fund. The Countryside Agency has provided 'health-checks' for towns and provided help to enable the local towns partnerships to develop. SEEDA has selected 11 towns in and around priority areas to deliver comprehensive regeneration. The towns are Battle, Hailsham, Heathfield and Rye

in East Sussex; the seaside towns of Sandown, Shanklin and Ventnor on the Isle of Wight; and Cranbrook, Hythe, Lenham, and Minster-in-Thanet in Kent. The intention is to develop this programme and spread support across the region. SEEDA is working with the South East Rural Towns Partnership and through the Rural Towns Rural Life, Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) programme has supported small-scale initiatives in more than 30 towns across the region.



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