



Delivering help to farmers and rural businesses

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By Joanna Righton

The Society and its partners have been busy with their practical work supporting farmers wishing to innovate and move their businesses forward. This has been delivered mainly through the Warwickshire Rural Hub, very much a farmer and rural business-led group. The Hub enables its members not only to voice their needs to the agencies that can help them, but also to gain information on new enterprises and develop collaborative new initiatives to secure a sound commercial future for agriculture and the rural economy in the 21st century.

What does the Warwickshire Rural Hub do?

- It organises practical events, meetings and visits on topical subjects from bio-fuels to IT, rural crime to farm waste;
- Facilitates and supports the development of rural business-led initiatives such as The Green Grocer Food Marketing & Distribution Project, Bio-energy-fuelled projects and black plastic recycling schemes;
- Provides a signposting service for Hub members and supports them through its themed business groups;
- Provides farm and rural businesses with grant advice through its very own Rural Enterprise Scheme Co-ordinator;
- Shares experience and liaises with the Rural Hubs in the four other West Midlands counties and increasingly with similar initiatives elsewhere in the country.

Key Achievements

Although established only in 2003, the Hub already has some significant achievements to its name. These include:-

- The organisation of a varied programme of practical events attended by more than 1,000 people;
- Over £900,000 awarded in the past 12 months through the Rural Enterprise Scheme to farm and rural businesses across Warwickshire and Solihull (£1.7m over the last three years);
- The development of a business signposting system that provides rural businesses with direct and easy access to the relevant services or agencies;
- Help for members wishing to develop business ideas, and access to businesses with similar interests through the Hub's 10 interest groups;
- An increase in membership by 170 per cent over the past year to almost 600.

Real Partnership Working

A cast of thousands has been involved in bringing those achievements to fruition – well, not quite that many, but a great many individuals and organisations who have built up a trust between them which has greatly benefited Hub members. These include:-

- The Hub Chair, Henry Lucas, a farmer from Kenilworth, and the members of his Steering Group;
- Defra, which has for the last three years funded the work of the Rural Enterprise Scheme Co-ordinator;

- Coventry & Warwickshire Learning & Skills Council (LSC), which has for the last two years funded the Hub's programme of events;
- Advantage West Midlands, the Regional Development Agency, which is now supporting the Hub's work;
- The Royal Agricultural Society of England, which has been a constant driving force in developing the Hub, and in practical terms has provided the resource of the Society's Rural Development Manager to develop the Hub's work, and has provided it with a home;
- Last but not least, the members of the Rural Forum for Coventry, Solihull & Warwickshire.

The Rural Forum

Established in 1997, the Rural Forum is an effective partnership of more than 20 public, private and voluntary organisations working to support and strengthen rural enterprise in the Coventry, Solihull & Warwickshire sub-region.

Originally, the Forum did this by developing practical events that responded to the needs of rural businesses. Partly because of this, Kenilworth farmer Henry Lucas asked for the support of Forum members in establishing a practitioners' grouping. This group became known as the Warwickshire Rural Hub and now acts as a delivery arm of the Rural Forum.

The Forum also helps the Hub in a very practical way:- the Forum Co-ordinator, whose salary is funded by the members of the Forum, has been empowered to undertake much of the Hub's work by organising events, supporting the Hub's business groups and keeping members informed. This has been crucial to the Hub's development. www.rural-forum.org.uk

Breaking New Ground

The RASE is delighted that, partly due to the success of the Warwickshire Rural Hub, there are now active delivery Hubs in every West Midlands county. The Warwickshire Hub works closely with all of them.

There are also a number of very successful delivery initiatives working with farmers and rural businesses across England. Whilst all working very effectively in their own areas, these initiatives had rarely come together or shared their experience. So the RASE convened a meeting of these delivery initiatives in April 2005 at Stoneleigh Park. 34 people representing 12 delivery initiatives and every English region, attended this very positive meeting. The group will meet again in the autumn.

Quotes

"The Hub provides the glue for people's ideas"
Adam Quinney, Warwickshire Rural Hub Steering Group Member

"Lively business groups such as the Warwickshire Rural Hub provide the LSC with an excellent way of promoting the benefits of learning and finding out what the farms and rural businesses really need"
Ken Marshall, Coventry & Warwickshire Learning & Skills Council

"Being a member of the Rural Forum has shown us that by working together and co-ordinating our activities we can provide a better service to rural businesses in Warwickshire"
Howard Andersen, Coventry & Warwickshire Chamber/Business Link