

Briefing 565

Rural business support

Summary

Farmers need long term support through change especially those with low social capital. They need trustworthy information, new skills, encouragement, particularly from their families, and time to take the necessary steps. Those providing services need clear strategies and communication about what they can and cannot do. Farmer driven groups are effective in generating change and they can get to some farmers who are difficult to reach. Funding for extension, education and training needs to be longer term and objectives which are seen as in the public interest should be paid for by government

This national conference '*Gateways to the Future: ways forward for rural business support*' was held at Stoneleigh on October 30th, run by the Royal Agricultural Society of England and ADER (Agricultural Development in the Eastern Region) and was sponsored by the Rural Forum for Coventry, Solihul and Warwickshire. The conference explored existing know how about how to foster change in farming. Email me if you would like a fuller summary of the conference: alan.spedding@bropenworld.com . Most of the presentations are at <http://www.ruraladvice.co.uk/briefingsind.asp?briefingID=29>

'Agriculture is a 10,000 year success story – and it's about people' (Neil Ridley, ADER)

Two surveys in the Eastern Region have found that farmers are worried about the long term future, that they feel isolated from the rest of the community and that they do not trust government. They feel that delivery of advice is too fragmented. Farmers with high social capital¹ are the most successful. Those with low social capital need support. It is not enough to say they must just be allowed to go out of business and let the next generation of farmers put it right. They will not quit. But they are difficult to reach.

From the point of view of the farmer – Henry Lucas² has a 'toolkit' which illustrates the wide range of pre-requisites for successful change. It includes access to trustworthy information and research, buy-in from the whole family, ability to network and learn new skills, encouragement to take the steps needed, access to a one stop shop to signpost information and time to make decisions and put them in place.

The ADER experience shows that to be successful extension projects need a clear focus on required outcomes, effective communication with partners, local government and commercial professionals and the credibility which can only be gained from a successful track record. Clarity about the scope of the services provided is also required, for example brokerage (signposting to existing support) versus getting involved in delivering change. There needs to be a strategy about how and when services should become chargeable – an important question in the long term sustainability of services. A constantly moving policy agenda was also cited as a difficulty in building sustainable services.

¹ Social capital is defined here as the capacity to interact with other farmers, government and the world at large and to leave their comfort zones and embrace change.

² Henry Lucas farms in Warwickshire and is one of the prime movers of the Warwickshire Rural Hub

There is a lot of experience now which shows that groups working from the bottom up³ and supported by a facilitator are effective in generating change. Peer to peer recruitment to advice works best and groups can be successful in involving farmers who are otherwise difficult to reach. They are effective because they use farmers as actors in the process not just as an audience for information. They need key players who have a high degree of ownership, commitment and peer respect.

Organisations like Natural England are seen by farmers as imposing 'top-down' advice which they don't think they need. Mixing an advisory role with policing legislation, as they do, is difficult - farmers tend to be reluctant to involve them if there is a threat of litigation however remote it is.

Advisers visiting farmers must be equipped to deliver effective advice. It is not sufficient for them just to signpost clients to the information they need. On the other hand signposting via the telephone or through websites is effective and encourages the growth of the organisations providing the support.

Longer term funding is needed for extension because just providing information is not enough. Innovation is a long term process and it often needs long term support. Education and training works on long term outcomes too and also need longer term commitment from funders. Funders were criticised for not communicating well with recipients of their funding or with one another and for being too obsessed with measurable outcomes. This can mean that projects become biased towards fulfilling numeric targets at the expense of their main purpose.

Objectives which are seen as in the public interest like desirable landscapes, enriched ecologies and aspects of sustainable communities should be paid for by government. Roles for public funded extension should include network building, social learning, developing new ways of succeeding in business in rural areas and negotiation and conflict management.

Speakers at the conference were:

Chairman - Professor Malcolm Stansfield

Professor Chris Garforth, Reading University

Henry Lucas - Warwickshire Rural Hub: http://82.109.194.215/~rural-forum/hub_home.htm

Neil Ridley and John Murphy, ADER: <http://www.ader.org.uk/>

Diane Spence, Natural England at <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/>

Karen Murray, University of Plymouth, SWEG www.regs.w.org.uk

Tom Phillips, Consultant – group facilitator - TIPhillips@aol.com

Natalia Fernandez, New Economic Foundation, BizFizz <http://www.bizfizznetwork.org.uk/>

David Lawrence, Easton College, RBAS <http://www.ruraladvice.co.uk/>

Adam Vernon, rbat: <http://www.rbat.org.uk/>

Tom Bell, Business Link Cumbria: <http://www.businesslinkcumbria.co.uk/>

Alan Spedding, 07 November 2007

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³ Bottom up – groups driven by their members rather than 'agendaed' from above.