

Wednesday 9 June 2010

Wimpole Hall Estate, Old Wimpole Road, ROYSTON,
SG8 0BW

East of England Rural Forum

“Estates, Tourism & Community in the East of England”

Minutes

Attendees

Lesley Anderson	John Atherton	Martin Aust
Frances Bedding	Kate Belinis	John Buchanan
David Burch	Mike Carter	John Carrick
Jim Gledhill	John Goodwin	Anne Marie Hamilton
Suzanne Harris	Brian Hayes	Jeremy Hill
Pat Holtom	Jasmine Joolia	Mags Lambert
Corinne Meakins	Deborah Ollett	Stuart Pile
Kate Sayer	Philip Wilson	David Wood

Apologies

Andrew Allen	John Barker	Kirsten Bennett
Phil Bennett-Lloyd	John Bindless	Caron Britton
Mick Carr	Rachel Carrington	Martin Collison
Nicola Currie	Marie Francis	Ed Gregory
Philip Hayes	Celia Hodson	Sarah Hughes
Edward Iveagh	Edwin Jones	Nicola Lloyd
Greg Luton	Mick Page	Nick Phillips
Cheryl Rose	Chris Tombs	Judith Watson
Cindy Winn	Richard Woolley	

Speakers

Richard Morris, Wimpole Farm Manager
Jason Beedell, Head of Research and Andrew Teanvy, Smiths Gore
Tony Butler, Director, Museum of East Anglian Life

1. Welcome – Pat Holtom

Pat welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Minutes and Matters Arising

Pat informed the meeting about the changes in government since the general election, namely Caroline Spelman who is Defra Secretary of State, Jim Paice who is the Minister for Agriculture and Food and Richard Benyon who is the Rural Affairs Minister. Defra would be focusing on Farming and there was talk that the Environment focus may well be moved from Defra. Pat was meeting Caroline Spelman in three weeks' time and some clarity may well follow that meeting.

The RRAF Chairs had an away day in May at which they discussed how to improve their working together. Also present were Defra civil servants: Ron Scrutton, Tony Williamson and Caron Britton.

Broadband was a hot topic.

Pat explained that she was maintaining the EERF's close links with CRC and that Nicola Lloyd had hoped to attend today but was having transport difficulties from London that morning and may not make it.

There was Defra funding for the first three months for the Forum and there was every hope that the second quarter's funding was also secured but this has yet to be confirmed. The Chairs would be meeting with the new minister, Richard Benyon, at the end of June. Pat had written to all the Regional MPs regarding the EERF and its work. She had also informed them of the Rural White Paper and invitations will be sent to them for the launch event together with a copy of the Rural White Paper. The Paper will also be distributed to Defra.

Suzanne Harris told the meeting that the Rural White Paper was now in the final text version and it only needed work on the layout and pictures to be added. The launch of the Paper was to be held at the **Trinity Centre on 8 September** by which time the new MPs would be settled into their roles. There would also be sub-regional events from the end of September in each of the counties with a different theme for each. These will allow people to go to different counties if they were particularly interested in that county's theme. The second part of the document was a "refreshable" Action Plan which would be kept up-to-date in response to external changes. The Rural White Paper is not a document we want sitting on a shelf gathering dust but must be perceived as a useful reference document. On behalf of the Forum, Suzanne thanked EEDA for its support.

3. Written reports from Sub-Groups

The Learning and Skills Sub-Group had not met recently and there was no report.

Pat told the meeting that because of pressure of work and changes to his church role, Graham Hedger had resigned as Chairman of the Housing Sub-Group but Martin Aust of Flagship Housing had taken over as Chairman. Martin reminded the meeting that he had been the housing sub-group chairman before Graham so he brought that experience to the role. He said the Forum had a lot of important issues to consider, e.g. affordable housing, village and town greens, rural exceptions, etc.

John Carrick expressed the view that 'garden grabbing' should be stopped. Martin explained that in his experience whilst there are some examples, this is not a big issue in this region. Martin said that policy changes were required to widen and clarify the use of section 106 exception sites to aid rural affordable housing provision and we need to use innovative ways of funding such as cross subsidy. Housing associations despite being very active, still needed subsidies to enable housing stock to be offered as 'affordable'.

Lesley Anderson raised the issue of empty rural housing stock. However Martin advised that particularly in rural areas houses are often empty for a reason such as being of low quality, inconvenient location or needing an uneconomical amount of work to bring them up to housing standards. He feels this argument of empty housing is used as a distraction to funding new build affordable housing.

4. Wimpole Estate Overview

Richard Morris, Wimpole Hall Farm Manager presented to the Forum. He explained that Wimpole was a working farm and was built in the 17th century. The various owners of it have spent huge amounts of money trying to keep it up to date and to maintain the 25,000 acres. It was when the third Earl owned it, however, that the estate really turned around as the Earl hired an architect to design the "perfect farm" and he then encouraged his farmers and tenants to learn about best practice. Now that the National Trust owns the property, it encourages sustainable farming and is working towards an organic conversion of the arable side. Wimpole is fortunate to have a good

income from visitors which means that the livestock side doesn't need to be a purely profitable business, but which is of significant social and historical value. Richard feels extremely lucky that the money earned stays at Wimpole which means it is not dependant on government farming subsidy and with the support of the National Trust is able to bid for development grants to support special projects and initiatives. NT Key Performance Indicators are the drivers to the estate. It has a community supported agriculture training scheme which effectively involves the local community and is a system which works extremely well.

Richard then took the members on a small tour to describe the breeding and farming carried out at Wimpole.

5. Working Positively with Rural Estates

Jason Beedell and Andrew Teanvy of Smiths Gore described a research project they conducted for East Midlands Development Agency to look at the benefits of estates in the region. They found that estates of all sizes in the region were beneficial in that they were significant employers in their locality; reduced travel to work distance; most of them used green or renewable energy sources; subsidised pubs, playing fields, etc in the locality; and provided a large contribution to the natural and built environment. Barriers they faced were that they didn't understand the language of public sectors; were unaware of the funding available; they didn't understand the policy framework of the public sector and its targets; struggled to get planning permission for building projects; and access to fast broadband was also an issue. Copies of the report were distributed to members.

6. Museum of East Anglian Life

Tony Butler, Director of the Museum, explained that it was a social history museum that had been in decline when he joined. However, reinventing it as a social enterprise and offering varied activities, programmes and initiatives means that over the last five years turnover had grown vastly. They had set up a social enterprise with four areas of focus. Training was the first of these areas and they taught both basic skills and ran a 10 week work based learning programme. They had seen 130 people pass through the training scheme and it had made a huge difference to the lives of many of them. Therapeutic placements were also available for those with illnesses or learning difficulties. They also had a retail focus where one example was supplying hanging baskets to their local authority for the town. They use historical greenhouses which no-one else wanted to take on and maintained them for plant propagation. Trainees are responsible for growing and making up the baskets and the money from the local authority then comes back into the museum to use for further community projects; so there was a real benefit to the community and a complete cycle and feedback. The final area of effort was on volunteering. The volunteers sometimes helped once or twice a year whilst others were working every week. The volunteers were often people who have been out of work for some considerable time or been ill and it has helped many get a paid job and recover their self-esteem.

7. Question and Answer Session

John Carrick commented that the public sector appeared to be very hostile towards estates and asked Smiths Gore researchers why this was and what could help make them less so? Andrew said that the planning problems and language used by the public sector were issues but also estates were viewed by the public sector as being "wealthy" and therefore bids for funding were hard to win.

David Wood asked if there was still a market for organic food due to the credit crunch as it is much more expensive to buy than non-organic?

Richard Morris believes that the customer should not have to pay as much of a premium as the market is currently dictating and even Prince Charles and his Duchy brand struggled to cope and in the end had to go to Waitrose for support. Richard is setting a business model based on commercial prices to see if he can make the production cost of organic match

against a sale price with a minimum premium. He is conscious he has a ready market for premium products through the National Trust. However at present out of all the farmland and estates owned by the National Trust, 2 million eggs are laid but the National Trust was not buying a single egg from its estates. Richard has been trying to get this ludicrous situation changed.

Kate Sayer stated that small farms contribute to the landscape as well as the larger estates. Richard Morris said that payments to farmers are now based on environmental factors and not just the wheat produced but acknowledged that those on the uplands do really struggle to survive.

Jeremy Hill asked if there was still a future for small farms in the East of England?

Richard Morris said that young people are just not coming into the farming industry so larger farms are favoured.

John Carrick asked about the depletion of fertility in the soil due to a lack of management of the grass lands.

Richard Morris said that to keep crop production to desired levels without rotation, then chemical fertilisers were necessary. To return the fertility to exhausted soil in traditional ways, grass lands and livestock are required. This seems an obvious solution to incorporating organic matter in tired soils, however, livestock is a different farming discipline and current market prices for livestock mean this is not a profitable activity and it is not financially viable anymore.

Pat thanked all the speakers for their interesting presentations and pointed out that the Rural Museum Network had a website that the members might be interested in having a look at. The address of that site is <http://www.ruralmuseums.specialistnetwork.org.uk/home>.

Close of Meeting