

FRIGSE

FARMING AND RURAL ISSUES GROUP South-East of England

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1) FRIGSE Meeting at NFU, Petersfield

Our thanks to William White and his team at NFU Petersfield for hosting our latest FRIGSE members meeting on 11th July 2017.

Attendees: John Hall (FRIGSE Chairman), Andrew Colquhoun (ex FRIGSE Chairman), William White (NFU), Robin Edwards (CLA), Mark Griffiths (RICS), Simon Matthews (Rural West Sussex Partnership), Richard Bellamy (Confederation of Forest Industries), Steve Millam (Brinsbury College), Caitlin Shardlow (Leader), Stephen West (AHDB), Don Cranfield (Plumpton College), Tim Barnford (CLA), Mark Howard (Brinsbury College), Rachel Carless (Fareshare), Andy Dennahy (Conexserv).

The main points of discussion are covered under the newsletter headings below.

2) Presentations

Rachel Carless from Fareshare gave a presentation concerning the Surplus Food Charity, and Andy Dennahy from Conexserv gave a presentation on Rural IT & Telecoms.

Since the meeting; the presentation slides have been circulated to FRIGSE Members.

3) Rural Broadband & Telecoms

Our main concern is that future productivity improvements in rural areas are very much dependent on good broadband and mobile phone coverage. It is estimated by independent organisations that only 85% of rural areas have adequate broadband coverage. Good mobile telecommunication contact is usually lost as soon as one moves away from built-up areas and main road corridors.

REPRESENTING:

Country Land & Business Association (CLA), Countryside Alliance, Agriculture & Horticulture Development Board (AHDB), National Farmers' Union (NFU), National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs (NFYC), National Trust, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), Confederation of Forestry Industries UK Ltd (Confor), British Institute of Agricultural Consultants (BIAC), Horticultural Trades Association (HTA), South East Agricultural Colleges (Landex).

The Government's Universal Obligation to achieve broadband speeds of 10Mb to all areas is welcomed; however, as current broadband reception in many rural areas is poor or non-existent; it is difficult to believe that this is realistic.

Interestingly; many Government buildings, including Local Authorities and schools, already have access to broadband with speeds of 100Mb; and yet businesses are not able to connect to the same level of service; even though the cables run right passed their premises.

Businesses find the application process for the "voucher scheme" a barrier, and access to mapping of infrastructure assets is critical if a viable fibre network is to be developed.

4) The new Government

Michael Gove has been appointed as the new Minister at Defra. George Eustice MP and Lord Gardner remain at Defra. Greg Clarke remains responsible for Industrial Strategy.

5) Brexit – Access to the labour market

Access to the European labour market remains the number one issue for rural businesses. If the free movement of EU workers is no longer possible into the UK, then other robust schemes will have to be put into place to satisfy demand. Options may include the return of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS) or industry specific work permits; however, it needs to be understood that many rural businesses have a need for all year-round workers; not just seasonal workers.

FRIGSE has made strong representations to Defra and other Government departments and committees on this issue.

6) Brexit – Trade Issues

The current poor exchange rate and its effect on the cost of raw materials and energy is causing concern amongst many rural businesses. Many of these direct costs have risen by approximately 15% over the last 12 months.

Obviously, the weak pound is of benefit to exporters; however, the vast majority of rural businesses are not in the export market, but are affected by the increased cost of imported goods; especially energy costs.

7) LEADER & EAFRD

LEADER grants of up to £75,000 are currently available and all approved projects will be guaranteed for payment until 2020.

EAFRD grants are available as follows:

- Business Development Capital Expenditure from £75,000 to £170,000
- Food & Drink Processing from £100k to £1million
- Tourism from £75k to £150,000

In the Coast to Capital LEP region; current EAFRD grants are available to the value of £3.8million. In the M3 LEP region; grants are available to the value of £4.2million.

FRIGSE Members are asked to encourage businesses to complete Expression of Interest forms for potential projects.

8) Rural Infrastructure – A27

The A27 is the most important East West road South of the M25 and M4 and is in desperate need of improvement; especially at Chichester, Arundel & Worthing.

It is essential for the prosperity of rural businesses and communities that improvement schemes for the A27 are brought back to the top of the agenda at the Ministry for Transport.

FRIGSE Members are engaged in business and community meetings with other stakeholders in the area, with the aim of encouraging Government to provide sufficient funds and plans to bring about significant improvements to the A27 as soon as possible.

9) Access to Education, Training & Apprenticeships

Chichester College (including Brinsbury) is merging with Central Sussex College and Northbrook College (Worthing) is merging with Brighton Metropolitan College.

The take-up of trail blazer apprenticeships at Brinsbury and Plumpton Colleges is speeding up. There is a move away from assignments and back to examinations, an increase in the number of training hours and 3 months' work placement within courses of 2 years.

Overall; apprenticeships now account for about 20% of student hours at Brinsbury and Plumpton Colleges.

10) Conference – Productivity

A **Conference** is being planned, focussed on issues around **Productivity**, such as: **Automation, Robotics, IT, Communications** and **Innovative Solutions**, to help increase productivity in rural businesses.

Such a conference will need to be organised, produced and financed in partnership with other regional organisations and stakeholders.

The most likely date for the conference will be during the first week of March 2018. Nat West Bank have already agreed to be sponsors, WSCC are supportive and discussions are underway as to conference facilities at the University of Chichester.

11) Date of Next Meeting

10:00 Tuesday 14th November 2017. Venue to be confirmed.

John Hall – 20th July 2017