

RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME: ROLE AS ACCOUNTABLE BODY.

1. CONTEXT

- 1.1 The current RDPE LEADER programme is coming to an end. A further programme is expected to be available but details are still emerging through the Department for Environmental and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). Expressions of Interest in bidding for a further programme are to be submitted by Friday 12th July 2013. Therefore consideration needs to be given promptly as to whether the District Council wishes to continue to be associated with the programme.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The RDPE LEADER programme is a European Union programme administered through DEFRA. There are 69 programmes run across England and in the New Forest there has been success in both rounds of this funding over the years. As a result, very significant funds have been brought into the District (approaching £4,000,000 over the last twelve years). The funds are able to be applied to small businesses and to voluntary organisations within the geographic area of benefit, which is shown in the attached plan.
- 2.2 All the RDPE LEADER programmes operate with two key elements – a Local Action Group (LAG) and an Accountable Body. The LAG is a group made up of local representatives from business, voluntary and statutory sectors. It is that Group which bids and then undertakes the allocation of funding through the life of the programme. Being the Accountable Body means undertaking the following functions:
- Act as employer for the programme staff.
 - Provide suitable accommodation and support.
 - Authorise payments to grant recipients.
 - Prepare Accountable Body administration claims.
 - Undertake internal audit.
- 2.3 The Council has been the Accountable Body for the two previous RDPE LEADER programmes. All the costs to the Council of undertaking this role have been covered by funding from these programmes.
- 2.3 Such has been the success of this programme across Europe that there will be a further round of funding made available. In addition, the way in which local projects have been delivered through LAGs has been recognised as a major success in really connecting to local communities. However, these Groups continue to need the support of a body that has the status and resources to provide the Accountable Body functions shown above and this has been the role of the Council up to this point.

3. CURRENT POSITION

- 3.1 The current RDPE LEADER scheme ends in March 2014. The Expression of Interest for the next round of bids is to be submitted to DEFRA by Friday 12th July 2013. If successful, there is a period of transition between January to December 2014, with a start on the full scheme in January 2015.
- 3.2 Therefore, whilst there is significant time before the new programme would start, there is a need to be clear about the principal components this next month. The New Forest LAG, combined with their officer support, has been particularly successful in the operation of the programme and are recognised as an exemplar of good practice. There are many advantages to maintaining the knowledge and skills of the current arrangements to support the new programme as it emerges.

4. FUTURE PROGRAMME

- 4.1 The emerging guidance on the new programme suggests that there will be greater emphasis on features such as economic development, enhancing competitiveness and reducing poverty, in the geographic area of benefit. This will fit very well with the Council's Corporate Plan.

5. FUTURE ROLE

- 5.1 The LAG has expressed a desire that the Council continue to be the Accountable Body. In preparing to respond to the call for Expressions of Interest, it is believed that it will present a stronger case if an Accountable Body can be named in that Expression of Interest. Given the successful arrangements up to this point and the benefits of the future programme, it is suggested that the Council, once again, offer to be the Accountable Body.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 At this stage there is no detail about the levels of funding or criteria for the two stages of transition and then the full bid. From experience with these programmes, it is possible that there might be a modest financial requirement for Council support at transition but unlikely in the full programme. The LAG is approaching the New Forest National Park Authority and Hampshire County Council for possible contributions to matched funding for the transition stage.

7. PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S COMMENTS

The Council has developed a successful partnership with the local community to enable this scheme to operate within the District. With this well-established approach, it will be much more effective to carry on with the current arrangements. It is hoped that the Expression of Interest will succeed and further benefits are brought to local businesses and communities in the years ahead.

8. RECOMMENDATION

- 8.1 It is recommended that, subject to the agreement of the Executive Director (Finance) on the details of funding arrangements, the Council continue to act as Accountable Body for the RDPE programme through the period of transition and, if the bid is successful, for the next full RDPE programme.

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Background papers: published reports

New Forest RDPE (Leader) Programme Area

(shaded grey)

