

RURAL WELCOME PROJECT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Real Places Ltd
on behalf of
Tourism South East
June 2008

The Rural Welcome Project ran from January 2004 to March 2008. It was managed by Tourism South East, the regional tourism organisation for south east England, and funded by the European Social Fund.

The project delivered a skills and training programme to rural tourism businesses in the region's 10 protected landscape areas. New knowledge and skills acquired through the project offered small and medium sized rural tourism businesses the means to adapt to the changing requirements of customers and to improve their competitive advantage in a very competitive industry.

If the measure of a successful skills development and training project is the response of the participating businesses, then the Rural Welcome project was highly successful. Aimed at small and medium sized enterprises operating in the rural areas of the south east, with an emphasis on recruiting and training women in those businesses, the project delivered 115 courses over a four year period.

The average score taken from course feedback forms was 8.6 on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is poor and 10 excellent. No course scored below 7. In two beneficiary surveys conducted during the life of project, one in autumn 2005 and one in spring 2008, only two responses out of a total of 155 had anything negative to say about the programme. Overwhelmingly the feedback was good.

The project was set up with the ambition to work with rural SMEs to:

- increase their engagement in the conservation and management of their local landscapes;
- improve their understanding and use of local produce;
- improve their marketing skills;
- increase their knowledge and adoption of green business practice.

Its aims and objectives sought also to:

- promote innovation and adaptability at work;
- develop entrepreneurship and enhance skills to grow rural tourism businesses;
- identify and deliver key business management skill and knowledge requirements;
- encourage the take-up of further learning;
- provide an outreach service for rural businesses;
- develop a web based information network.

There were three important factors in achieving these aims.

1. The project, through TSE's strong network of partners and industry contacts, received continual feedback on the content and usefulness of the courses. The ESF Programme was flexible

enough to allow the development and addition of new courses as the project progressed if the feedback suggested it. Consequently, from the initial portfolio of four courses, a further seven courses were added to the programme dealing with the rapid growth in the years the project ran in the use of the internet in tourism promotion and booking, and to take account of the growing interest and knowledge of the industry in sustainable business practice. The ability to introduce new course product to suit the needs of the industry in a fast changing sector was significant in generating such a positive response from businesses.

2. The courses were developed to offer practical, and in many cases, cost efficient, advice that could be easily taken on board by SMEs to improve business skills and increase visitor numbers and satisfaction. 90% of businesses attending the courses went on to take particular measures to improve their business including work on website content and optimisation, the use of local produce, sustainable business practices, and engaging with local networks through their local protected area teams.
3. The timing and length of the courses were, through TSE's long experience in this field, designed to encourage owners and managers of SMEs with businesses run on minimal staff resources to attend. Courses were kept to a length that suited the beneficiaries and allowed them to manage their business around attending.

The project hit all the key quantitative targets. The number of individual beneficiaries and businesses involved were both exceeded. 786 individuals were trained against a target of 731, and 622 business were involved against a target of 489. 526 female beneficiaries participated against a target of 512, and the targeted numbers of disabled and minority ethnic beneficiaries were both exceeded.

An ambition to encourage 105 businesses to take up further learning beyond the course content was overachieved with a final total of 354 businesses taking up additional learning opportunities.

In only two areas did the project fail to reach its targets. The first was in not achieving the number of recorded beneficiary hours. The original plan was to record not only the time spent by participants at the courses, but also to track the hours they spent post-course implementing any follow-up actions. This proved to be a task that the businesses, who were asked to record this time and send it onto TSE, were unable or unwilling to do. Attempts early in the project to collect returns resulted in feedback from businesses that they did not have the time to record and return these figures. The nature of their working lives did not allow them to easily identify and measure the exact time spent on specific post-course activities.

Secondly, plans for the provision of a web-based post-training information and discussion forum did not gel. The online Rural Welcome branded information on courses and booking systems were well presented and clear. Post-course information was added to TSE's business to business website. However, expectations that businesses would use these facilities were not met. Lessons learnt have led to the rationalisation of these and other similar sites and the understanding that

SMEs do not have the time to spend in online forums and in browsing information sites. What works is a mixture of personal, postal and web contacts.

In terms of meeting the broader ambitions of the project to encourage greater industry engagement in local landscape management and conservation, generate a greater understanding and use of local produce, improve marketing skills, and increase the knowledge and adoption of green business practices, the project has met its objectives.

The management teams of the protected areas who worked with TSE reported a closer, more productive working relationship with businesses and in particular with those attending the *AONB Awareness* and *Local Distinctiveness* sessions. Participant feedback showed that they welcomed the opportunity to learn more about their locale and to offer their customers a greater range of sustainable activity options.

A total of 21 *Sourcing, Preparing and Serving Local Produce* courses were held for 210 beneficiaries. 43% of all businesses surveyed at the end of the project said they had increased their take-up of local produce, a larger ratio than that of beneficiaries attending the *Sourcing, Preparing and Serving Local Produce* courses against the total numbers. This can probably be explained by the fact that the *Green Business* courses also included some encouragement to serve local produce and delegates acted on that advice. By this measure the project delivered on encouraging take-up of local produce. Anecdotal evidence from County Food Groups that participated in the programme confirms that the links between tourism businesses and local producers have been increased.

The planned delivery of 48 courses to improve marketing skills was exceeded with a total of 71 courses delivered over four years. This was mainly as a result of the delivery of additional IT and e-marketing courses at the express wish of businesses, many of whom acted on the information provided. 23% of those surveyed had improved their Google rankings, 28% had optimised their website, and 39% had made positive changes to their websites. The case studies revealed that six of the 11 businesses interviewed had attended and acted upon an IT based Rural Welcome course.

The impact the project had on the uptake of green businesses practices was substantial. From an original estimate of six courses, a total of 13 *Green Business* courses were held advising 123 beneficiaries. In addition, the *AONB Awareness* and *Local Distinctiveness* courses included elements of sustainable business operation. Consequently, 35% of those surveyed said they had introduced green business practices as a result of the project representing a figure of 270 of the total number of businesses engaged through the life of the project. 19 businesses had progressed to achieving an accreditation mark, almost one in six of those attending the *Green Business* course. This is a significantly higher ratio of green accredited businesses to course attendees than that of the total regional tourism businesses where only 200 of 12,000 businesses hold an accreditation.

The Rural Welcome project was a new direction for TSE in targeting rural businesses exclusively. The project's quantitative targets were met and exceeded. But more importantly, the recorded beneficiary and partner feedback shows plainly that the businesses appreciated the project's focus and acted upon information provided through the courses to their own benefit and to the wider benefit of the environment in which they operate.