

# FINAL EVALUATION OF THE RURAL WELCOME PROJECT



Real Places Ltd  
on behalf of  
Tourism South East  
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## Executive summary

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.

# Introduction

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

This report evaluates the extent to which the ambitions for the project were met. Sections 1 and 2 set out an overview of the project, its origins, strategic context and delivery phases, and identify the project's aims, objectives and output targets.

The delivery of the project over its four year life is covered in Section 3, and Section 4 assesses its outcomes against the original aims, objectives and targets.

Finally, the project outcomes have been assessed and conclusions drawn from the evaluation have been set down in Sections 5 and 6, with any recommendations for future projects highlighted.

A series of short case studies that offered some participating businesses the opportunity to voice their thoughts about the project is provided as a separate document.

This report has been prepared by Real Places Ltd on behalf of TSE. It draws on project data, beneficiary and partner surveys, and telephone and face-to-face interviews.

Real Places would like to thank the training team at TSE for providing the detailed information on the project's performance, and the businesses who took the time to be interviewed in more depth for the case studies included in this report.

# 1. Project overview

## 1.1 Background

The Rural Welcome Project grew out of a partnership programme between TSE, the Countryside Agency (now Natural England) and the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) to develop sustainable tourism in the region's 10 protected landscape areas that ran from 2002 to 2004. These protected areas (designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and a National Park) make up 30% of the area of the south east region. The landscapes they cover are key drivers for tourism visits to the region. They include:

- New Forest National Park;
- Chichester Harbour AONB;
- The Chilterns AONB;
- East Hampshire Downs AONB;
- High Weald AONB;
- Isle of Wight AONB;
- Kent Downs AONB;
- North Wessex Downs AONB;
- Surrey Hills AONB;
- Sussex Downs AONB.

The partnership identified the need for a skills and training programme that covered the needs of small and micro rural tourism businesses. Mainstream programmes did not always address the particular needs of the sector and found it difficult to engage with them. The Rural Welcome project sought to provide an innovative approach to engaging the industry via their identification with the protected areas, the landscapes the business owners and staff lived and worked in, as well as those on the outskirts of these areas.

## 1.2 Strategic context

The project bid was submitted under Policy Field 4, Measure 1 of the ESF: 'To update/upgrade employees' skills including basic and key skills'.

It was based on some key aims in the ESF's Regional Development Plan including the ambition to 'maintain high and stable levels of growth and employment for all ..... whilst protecting the environment and making best use of natural resources'. The plan recognised that the agricultural

sector had been in decline for some years and that reliance on traditional farming industries in rural areas posed a threat to the economy and employment. Increasing diversification away from farming into tourism and hospitality was an important means of maintaining the rural economy. The Rural Welcome project supported that trend and provided the opportunity for businesses to improve their skills in what for many was a new sector.

The project also addressed an aim within the Regional Development Plan to promote and support entrepreneurship in rural businesses, their employees and micro-businesses in isolated circumstances. The Foot and Mouth epidemic of 2001 had highlighted the importance of tourism to the rural economy and the need to promote innovation and quality within the sector.

Protected landscapes attract visitors because of their amenity value, tranquillity and strong sense of place. Too many visitors can destroy the very qualities that visitors come to enjoy. The need for businesses to act sustainably and to encourage their visitors to do so has an economic as well as an environmental rationale. The project's course content was designed to provide knowledge and skills to businesses to help them operate sustainably with an emphasis on green business practice, encouraging walkers and cyclists, retaining visitor spend in the local economy, and sourcing local produce.

### **1.3 Project phasing**

The project began in January 2004 and was initially planned to run for two years until December 2005. After successful completion of that phase of the project, the ESF programme managers at the Government Office for the South East (GOSE) offered TSE the opportunity to extend the project. The original bid was revised and updated and phase 2 of the project began in the spring of 2005 and ran until March 2008.

The project outputs and outcomes evaluated and reported on in this report cover both phases of the project. Where relevant, reference is made to individual phases, but the majority of comments, assessments and conclusions are drawn from the project as a whole.

### **1.4 Project evaluation**

Internal TSE evaluation of the project has been ongoing throughout the four years of its life, and adjustments and changes to both the targets and the course content have been initiated as a result. The project been financially audited twice within its operational life. Firstly at the completion of the first phase in March 2005 when it was given a clean bill of health by GOSE's ESF programme auditors, and secondly in May 2007 when GOSE's Government Audit Team reported that "The Project is well managed and is being delivered in line with the application and the European Commission regulations".

This report is the culmination of both an ongoing analysis of the project's effectiveness, monitored through delegate feedback from the courses and discussions with the industry and partners, and a more formal survey of businesses and partners undertaken in the final months of the project. Surveys of participating businesses and partners at the end of both phases 1 and 2 collected the views of those involved in the project. In addition, there were telephone and face-to-face interviews with various beneficiaries and partners.

TSE have also provided the report's author with information from their administrative files on the type and number of courses held, details of the beneficiaries, and the results of the feedback data collected at each course.

As part of a commitment to the ESF programme, TSE will make this report and its associated executive summary widely available to beneficiaries, partners, regional agencies and other public or private sector bodies interested in the project. The executive summary will be available on the TSE website.

## 2. Project outputs

### 2.1 Source of outputs

The aims, objectives, targets and outputs set out below are drawn from the revised project bid document submitted to GOSE for phase 2 of the project.

### 2.2 Project aims

The project's main aim, as expressed in the project bid, was to promote innovation and adaptability in work, develop entrepreneurship and enhance skills to grow rural tourism businesses in the South East that recognise the need to improve continually to provide a robust, sustainable tourism industry in vulnerable landscapes.

There was a secondary aim of supporting women who wished to start, or who were already running, their own business.

### 2.3 Project objectives

The Rural Welcome project objectives were as follows.

1. To deliver an AONB Rural Welcome introduction programme that engages both rural tourism businesses and those considering entering the industry through their links with the landscape, supported by agencies such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and Business Link, through its Farm Business Advice Service.
2. To identify specific key business and management skill and knowledge requirements, using a combination of training needs analysis and a web-based self assessment tool, targeting individual women managers and key workers in rural tourism SMEs, confirming needs in areas such as business planning and tourism marketing that are currently insufficiently met.
3. To encourage these businesses to take up further learning and development through a portfolio of training that addresses the defined needs at a time that will effectively engage most participants, bringing together several rural tourism SMEs to cover topics such as customer care, how to add value to the business, sourcing and preparing local produce, marketing tourism in protected areas, running a sustainable tourism business, and catering for walkers and cyclists.
4. To provide an outreach Rural Tourism Adviser for the participating SMEs to help them develop their skills following the training process, covering people management, financial management, organisational structures, personnel, and application of IT.

5. To support the above four objectives with a web-based network run by TSE that continues a dialogue with managers and key workers, offers advice, news and information on AONB and tourism issues and signposts further business advice and training programmes, generating an awareness of the need for good business practice in order to sustain a stable and profitable concern.

## 2.4 Project targets and outputs

There were a number of targets and outputs set within the bid process. These are set out below.

## 2.5 Beneficiary targets

<b>Table 1: Project targets and outputs</b>	
<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Target/output</b>
Number of businesses attending courses	489 businesses
Number of individuals attending courses	731 individuals
Number of beneficiary training hours logged	7,892 training hours
Number of SMEs taking-up further training and support	105 businesses
Number of <i>AONB Awareness</i> courses	26 courses
Number of <i>Marketing in a Protected Area</i> courses	48 courses
Number of <i>Sourcing, Preparing and Serving Local produce</i> courses	37 courses
Number of <i>Green Business</i> courses	6 courses
Number of completed training needs analyses	489 TNAs
Effectiveness of courses	Above average scores on course feedback forms

As well as identifying the number of businesses and individuals who would benefit from the project, the beneficiary targets also included targets to achieve a majority of women participants, a number of minority ethnic and disabled beneficiaries. It was envisaged that all the beneficiaries attending courses would be in employment.

The details are set out overleaf.

<b>Table 2: Beneficiary details</b>	
<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Target</b>
Total number of beneficiaries	731
Beneficiaries in employment	731
Female beneficiaries	512
Male beneficiaries	219
Minority ethnic beneficiaries	15
Disabled beneficiaries	19

## 2.6 Analysis of targets and outputs

Sections 4 and 5 of the report on project performance and project outcomes review the data collected during the life of the project against the aims, objectives, targets and outputs set out in this section. Section 5 also reviews the impacts of the project; those consequences, actions and effects that were included as part of the rationalisation for the bid but were outside the scope of the project managers to record and obtain quantitative measurements. Qualitative information was collected through the beneficiary and partner surveys, and interviews conducted at the end of the project.

## 3. Project delivery

### 3.1 Project management

The project was managed by TSE. A Project Administrator has been responsible for the day to day operation, the collection and collation of data on the project, and ongoing liaison with partners and GOSE. She has been supported by other members of TSE's training team.

TSE's in-house audit and financial management teams have managed and monitored the budget and submitted, along with the Project Administrator, the required regular reports to GOSE throughout the life of the project. This included obtaining Public Match Funding Certificates from partners and ensuring the project's compliance with State Aid rules.

The work was overseen by TSE's Head of Training Services and the Head of Partnership and Business Support, who worked with the delivery team to review the project continually throughout its life, agree changes in course content or emphasis, discuss arrangements with project partners and assist in the promotion of the project through interaction with TSE's wider industry and public agency stakeholders.

TSE has an Equal Opportunities Policy, which informed the delivery of the project. Its application to all parts of the programme ensured that there were no practices or policies that discriminated against any sections of the population. Course venues were inspected by the Project Administrator before use to ensure accessibility. Publicity included statements that TSE welcomed involvement from all sections of the population regardless of disability, gender or religious and ethnic background. All course applications asked beneficiaries to state if they had any special needs or dietary requirements.

Effective project management enabled the project targets to be reached at a smaller cost than originally envisaged – a cost of £313,304 rather than the original estimate of £333,952.

The two audits carried out during the project's operation, both of which returned a positive report, strongly suggest that the management of the project was carried out in a professional manner.

### 3.2 Project outreach

One of the objectives in the project bid was to provide an outreach Rural Tourism Adviser to engage with the businesses and to work with them through the project to facilitate further action through partner working, develop a web presence to support beneficiaries after attending courses and to generate online discussion forums.

The bid suggested that this would be a discrete post filled by one individual. In fact this was not the case. This role was carried out by a number of staff across TSE's training and development teams over the life of the project and in some cases by staff working within partner organisations.

This decision to split the role among a number of TSE and partner staff was made because of changes in the roles and structures of TSE and the partner organisations, in particular the emergence of a network of TSE sub-regional skills co-ordinators, who could engage with businesses at a local level.

In addition, TSE absorbed the some of work of the South East AONB Sustainable Tourism project into its mainstream service in 2003, and the Kent Downs, Surrey Hills and South Downs AONBs took on staff to undertake part of the work of the AONB project.

This approach proved successful and experience has shown that locally employed staff are better able to engage SMEs than those operating at regional level, and that working closely with partner organisations strengthens relationships.

### 3.3 Online information

If any element of the proposed work was underdeveloped, it was the provision of web-based post training information. 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 and was combined with a wide range of other business advice and information. It was not identified specifically as Rural Welcome content.

In the early years of the project there was a rapid growth in the number of websites developed to provide tourism information to businesses and the consumer. They were seen as a quick and inexpensive way to create relationships with businesses and to provide a large quantity of information to them. The proliferation of sites, including the early development of TSE's business to business site, assumed too much from SMEs. Lessons learnt have led to the rationalisation of these 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.

Later TSE programmes have developed effective online training and information services as knowledge has increased on how to use web pages with other media, and there is greater understanding about how businesses engage with online training and information services. The proposal in the original bid to develop an online discussion forum was one of a number of ambitious projects at the time to build virtual knowledge sharing. What became apparent quite quickly was that small and micro businesses do not have the time to spend on engaging in online discussions, and that the resources required to keep an online forum fresh and active are significant.

Much has been learnt about the use of websites in training and businesses engagement during the life of the project, which has been applied in later programmes. The online ambitions for the Rural Welcome project in the bid are the only area of management and delivery that were not wholly successful, getting caught up in the prevailing mood at the time that IT provided a quick and effective means of communicating with businesses.

### 3.4 Partner involvement

Project partners were all either local authorities or the protected area teams who managed and conserved the countryside. Their involvement was in three key areas:

- assistance in the dissemination of information about the project and courses;
- involvement in the courses, providing information and presentations on the local area;
- maintaining and building relationships with the participating businesses within their area.

The time they spent working on the project was recorded on timesheets and used as in-kind match funding.

Working with the protected area teams provided strong backing for a number of the project's strategic objectives, such as working with remote rural businesses, linking tourism delivery and visitor activity more closely to the landscape in which it takes place, and bringing small and micro businesses together within an area to encourage the retention of visitor spend in the local community.

**Partner feedback on the project was positive about its rural focus. The Sussex Downs and East Hampshire AONB reported that the concentration on rural businesses had helped. Their feedback in response to that question said, “Yes, it has helped to improve visitor experience within the AONB”. The Surrey Hills AONB agreed, “Yes – rural businesses often feel isolated and so it was useful to target their needs and to highlight the specific opportunities as a rural business”.**

On a more practical level, partnership working offered economies of scale in service delivery and access to a wealth of local knowledge, information and promotional material that the beneficiaries could use to pass onto their customers. A list of project partners is included as Appendix 3.

### 3.5 Informal partners

Through the four year course of the project the changing nature of delivering a region-wide programme across a disparate sector meant that a number of new relationships and shared

delivery services grew up with organisations that were not originally signed up to the bid. These new arrangements greatly facilitated the successful delivery of the project.

However, their time and effort on behalf of the project was not recorded for official purposes or match funding. There was a willingness on behalf of these partners to commit formally to the project, but the rules mitigated against that action. In the event of new partners coming on board during the course of the project, GOSE, while not objecting to additional partner support, required the re-submission of the bid, which involved the re-working of a lengthy and complex document and the re-issuing of all Public Match Funding Certificates. Consequently, to avoid this time consuming administrative work, partners were taken on without 'officially' signing up to the project.

While not affecting the outcome of the Rural Welcome project, the issue could affect those bids that rely more heavily on public match funding from partners. An easier process to bring new partners on board would ease the problem.

### **3.6 Promotion and beneficiary recruitment**

In order to promote the source of the funding for the project, all stationery, marketing literature and course materials carried the ESF logo. At each event the source of the funding for the courses was made clear, and all accompanying paperwork carried the ESF logo.

The promotion of the courses and the recruitment of beneficiaries was undertaken through a number of channels. Working with TSE and partner databases, mailings to businesses within the protected areas were sent out announcing the start of the project. These mailings were repeated within the first year of the project. As the project became established, Rural Welcome courses were promoted as part of TSE and partner promotional literature and websites, as well as through one-off promotions and mailings in particular areas where courses were being held.

In addition the project was promoted at all TSE events, such as the annual Members' Conference and AGM, the annual Tourism Council and sub-regional members' days, and at a wide range of partner managed events. TSE staff attended many of the partner events to promote the project and recruit new businesses.

The project was also promoted consistently through TSE's quarterly newsletter and e-news bulletins to the industry, and via the training team's regular newsletter specifically on training matters circulated to the industry.

The benefits of a wide network of partners all promoting courses cannot be underestimated. Small businesses are very difficult to reach with information, and it had been particularly difficult to engage with rural businesses. Using locally based partners, and sending the message out consistently and in different formats through TSE and partner literature may have resulted in some duplication of information to individual businesses, but multiple opportunities to view the same

information is a key factor in terms of driving home the message and encouraging businesses to attend courses.

Even with this widespread promotional coverage, there were some early examples of courses having to be cancelled when booking failed to reach the minimum numbers required. As they had been planned to fit into business schedules (see 3.9 below) and, thanks to the ESF programme, were free of charge, this reflects the difficulties inherent in engaging with this sector.

### 3.7 Course content and delivery

The initial bid identified four core courses that would be delivered through Rural Welcome. These were listed as:

- AONB Awareness/Induction;
- Sourcing, Preparing and Serving Local Produce;
- Marketing in a Protected Area;
- Green Business.

However, during the project new versions of these courses and some more specialised courses were developed in response to feedback and to meet specific beneficiary needs. These revised and more specialised courses aimed to meet the original project objectives. In rolling out the project over four years a total of 115 courses were delivered including a wider range of subjects.

For example, in relation to marketing in protected areas, businesses expressed the need to learn how best to market to walkers and cyclists. This was fully supported by the protected area partners who were keen to encourage quiet, car free recreation in their areas. So initially the *Welcoming Walkers and Cyclists* course was the main focus. However, through the life of the project, the importance of e-marketing grew exponentially and it became clear that what businesses required was assistance in making the most of this new media. A number of specific e-marketing courses were developed and delivered through the life of the project, culminating, over the final five months, in the delivery of six *The Essential Guide to Social Media for Tourism* courses. This course focuses on the new phenomena of online social networking and consumer generated content, something that did not figure on the radar of business marketing to potential visitors in 2004.

**The benefits of this approach were articulated by David Dare of Oxfordshire Narrowboats who said of the *Search engine optimisation* course, “It was brilliant. We have trebled enquiries”.**

In the case of the *Green Business* course, the growth in recent years of awareness of the need to act sustainably necessitated the continual development of the initial course and the introduction of

two additional courses to cater for the increase in business interest and knowledge, and the opportunity to market to a 'green' audience.

**Richard Shrubbs from Wicks Farm Holiday Park commented that, “the course concentrated my mind on energy and recycling issues”.**

By the end of the project, 11 different courses had been delivered under the Rural Welcome banner.

<b>Table 3: Delivery of courses</b>	
<b>Course title</b>	<b>Number delivered</b>
AONB Awareness (title changed to Local Distinctiveness)	10
Sourcing, Preparing and Serving Local Produce	21
Welcoming Walkers and Cyclists	25
Green Business/Green Advantage	5
Understanding Green	6
Marketing your Green Credentials	2
Smarter Marketing	13
Winning Websites	1
E-tourism Workshop	11
Search Engine Optimisation	15
The Essential Guide to Social Media for Tourism	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>

The flexible approach that led to the revision of existing courses and the creation of new ones was a strength of the project across a four year period in a sector that can change quickly. This adaptability was aided by TSE's strong network of industry contacts and public agency partners, who were able offer constructive and timely feedback on what businesses required and support in re-designing course content.

Ideas and courses developed during the Rural Welcome project have provided an excellent legacy as they have been taken up by TSE through other programmes. A project educating and networking chefs in SMEs so that they are able to source and prepare local produce is a development of the *Local produce* course first run through Rural Welcome. The success of the E-marketing courses rolled-out through the project led directly to additional support from SEEDA for an extension of course delivery into other tourism sectors. These are both examples of where ideas generated in one programme can have a direct benefit on other tourism sectors.

**Partner response from East Hampshire District Council summed up the effectiveness of the approach, “Courses focused on information of relevance to local businesses. The interactive nature of courses was a great strength and course delivery was excellent (standard of trainer and course materials)”.**

### **3.8 Trainers and venues**

The trainers used during the project were drawn from TSE’s experienced and qualified team, who deliver across a number of projects. The rural focus of the project meant that trainers needed specialist knowledge of the sector, and in particular the needs of SMEs. Analysis of the feedback forms collected from each course show that, on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 Poor, 2 Satisfactory, 3 Good and 4 Very Good) no trainer was rated below 3, with the average over the 115 courses of 3.5.

Venues used for the courses were inspected before use to make sure that they were fully accessible and of a sufficient quality. A wide range of venues were used from the more typical hotel conference facilities to visitor attractions, a yacht club and protected area visitor centres. The course feedback forms show an average score of 3.5 for venues, with only two venues scoring 2, and none below that.

### **3.9 Course length and timings**

TSE’s experience in delivering courses to SMEs over a number of years was applied to the Rural Welcome project. The courses were kept short to allow small business owners and managers the opportunity to attend without taking too much time out of their busy days. With a micro business where there may be only one owner/manager, anytime away from the business can translate into missed bookings and lost business.

Courses were almost all held over the lunchtime period, with start times at or after 10 am to allow owners/managers of small accommodation establishments the time to serve and clear breakfast and prepare rooms for new guests. They finished early or mid afternoon to allow accommodation owners/managers the opportunity to return in time to receive new guests. They all included a lunch break, which gave participants the opportunity to network and build local relationships and contacts. Businesses found this approach beneficial.

**Liz Elser from Nash Manor commented, “They were beneficial, well organised and the course providers knew what they were talking about. I’m always so busy, it is sometimes difficult to set time aside to plan for the future and it is great to be able to meet up with other B&B providers and share ideas.”**

## 4. Project performance

### 4.1 Delivery and outputs

A number of specific targets and outputs were set within the project bid and these were outlined in Section 2. Table 4 shows a comparison of the targets measured against the actual returns over the four year project period.

<b>Table 4: Delivery performance</b>		
<b>Measure</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Actual</b>
Number of businesses engaged	489	622
Number of individual beneficiaries	731	786
Number of training hours	7,892	4,457
Number of businesses taking-up further training and support	105	354
Number of <i>AONB Awareness</i> courses	26	10
Number of <i>Marketing in a Protected Area</i> courses	48	71
Number of <i>Sourcing, Preparing and Serving Local Produce</i> courses	37	21
Number of <i>Green Business</i> courses	6	13

### 4.2 Businesses and individuals

The target of 489 businesses engaged through the project has been exceeded by over 25%, demonstrating that the course content, promotion and timings struck the right chord with businesses in the protected areas. The number of individual beneficiaries exceeded the target by 7%. The relatively small differential between businesses and individuals suggests that the number of micro businesses involved in the project was high and that courses catered for the owners of those micro businesses rather than multiple employees from larger businesses.

<b>Table 5: Beneficiaries by business size</b>	
<b>Business size by employee count</b>	<b>Actual</b>
Under 10	509
11 to 49	83
50 to 249	30
Total	622

The number of training hours anticipated in the original bid was greater than the actual recorded hours by a figure of 3,435 hours. The explanation for this shortfall is that the original intention was to record not only the hours spent by businesses in attending courses, but also to capture the amount of time they spent after the course taking follow-up action. This proved to be a task that the businesses, who were asked to record this time and send details to 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 training activities.

A better measure of the actions taken as a result of attending the courses has been gathered in through the beneficiary survey via questions on additional support and training opportunities taken up and what changes or developments were introduced as a result of the courses. The results show that 57% of those surveyed took up further training or support, and that 90% made changes or developments to their business as a result of attending a course. Multiplied up across the total numbers, it is estimated that 354 businesses took up further support or training (against a target of 105), and 707 individuals made changes or developments to their business operations as a result of attendance at the courses.

TSE were unable to capture the actual number of hours spent on undertaking this follow-up action, but the survey reveals that follow-up actions were taken by a large majority of participating businesses.

### **4.3 Courses**

115 courses were delivered against a target of 117. As detailed in 3.7 above, the content and emphasis of the courses changed over the life of the project to suit the needs and expectations of the beneficiaries. The original emphasis on courses covering local distinctiveness, local produce, marketing and green business was maintained, but the specific content changed to suit emerging trends and business needs.

With particular reference to the AONB and local produce courses, the original target of 26 and 37 courses respectively was reduced to 10 and 21 as partner programmes in protected areas and the work of the County Food Groups covered these elements, allowing the Rural Welcome project to increase its e-marketing and green business programmes.

#### 4.4 Training needs analyses

The original bid had a target of 489 TNAs to be completed in the initial phase 1 period up to December 2005. As part of a programme review in early 2005 this number was amended down with GOSE's agreement to 344. Ultimately 351 TNAs were undertaken through the phase 1 programme. During phase 2 of the project from January 2005 to March 2008, TNAs have been carried out by TSE's sub-regional skills coordinators. They have signposted businesses towards the Rural Welcome project where the TNA suggested that need, and have continued to be a source of recruitment for beneficiaries throughout the life of the project.

#### 4.5 Effectiveness of courses

The average score taken from course feedback forms was 8.5 on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is poor and 10 excellent. No course scored below 7. This is a justification for the flexibility displayed in the delivery that allowed course content to change to cater for the expressed needs of the businesses.

**Silma Bruford from Brufords B+B said of the courses she attended, "They provide you with information on what's special about the area you operate in and the different places to go. You can then pass that information onto your customers. It gives you ideas. We went to the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum and on the Solar Boat at Itchenor".**

#### 4.6 Beneficiary targets

All course participants were asked to complete a form that recorded their gender and ethnic group, and if they had a disability. The broad aim set at the start of the project was to attract to the courses a majority of female SME owners and managers to help improve their business knowledge and entrepreneurship. The returns show that this was achieved with a total of 526 women beneficiaries against a target of 512. In addition, the aim to work entirely with those already in employment was achieved. Table 4 compares the target figures against actual outputs.

<b>Table 6: Beneficiary targets and actual figures</b>		
<b>Measure</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Actual</b>
Total beneficiary numbers	731	786
Total in employment	731	786
Female beneficiaries	512	526
Male beneficiaries	219	260
Disabled beneficiaries	19	34
Minority ethnic beneficiaries	15	50

#### **4.7 Minority ethnic and disabled beneficiaries**

The actual numbers of both these groups exceeded the targets set; in the case of disabled beneficiaries by nearly 100%. The number of minority ethnic beneficiaries recorded consists of those who did not identify themselves as White British. The total of 50 is made up of 7 White Irish, 31 White Other, and 12 Other, Black, Chinese or Asian. Five beneficiaries did not record their ethnicity.

#### **4.8 Sustainability and IT targets**

There was a particular emphasis in the application process on support for approaches to sustainable development and the use of IT.

One of the main objectives of the project was to encourage local businesses to understand the need to conserve the natural environment and to pass that message on to visitors. Comments from the beneficiary survey show that this message was taken on board, and partners recorded a significant increase in the numbers of businesses working with the protected area teams.

**The High Weald AONB reported that it had “made face to face contact with far more businesses than it had in the past”, the Surrey Hills AONB tourism database expanded from 400 to 600 contacts, and over 450 businesses were brought into a South Downs AONB partnership network. Chichester Harbour AONB reported they, “had good feedback from attendees and have gone on to build good relationships with local accommodation providers”.**

Another objective of the project was greater use of local produce by tourism businesses to increase the economic benefit to local producers from the tourism sector, and to reduce food miles. 21 *Sourcing, Preparing and Serving Local Produce* courses were held with 210 beneficiaries attending and an average course satisfaction mark of 8 out of 10.

**Comments such as, “increased enjoyment and take-up of cooked breakfasts using menus promoting local food”, “easier to find specific local food suppliers”, and “more aware of the need to use local produce” show that the message did get across.**

67 of those surveyed said they increased their use of local produce. This represents 43% of the total sample, 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.

**Liz Elser from Nash Manor said, “I found it very good. I have always tried to be organic but this course really did make me try to be more local. The ‘Taste of Sussex’ booklet was very helpful. I went away and changed to a local producer for my breakfast sausages and I got some really good ideas for seasonal compotes from someone else on the course.” This last comment shows the importance of the networking element offered by the courses.**

The final measure of the impact the project had on sustainability is the uptake of green businesses courses. From an original estimate of 6 courses, a total of 13 courses were held advising 123 beneficiaries. 35% of those surveyed said they had introduced green business practices as a result of the project, and 19 businesses had gone on to achieve an accreditation mark, almost 1 in 6 of those attending the course. This is a significantly higher ratio of green accredited businesses to course attendees than of the total regional tourism businesses where only 200 of 12,000 businesses hold an accreditation.

**Comments from the beneficiary survey included “Having attended the green seminar in Arundel last year we joined the GTBS and gained the gold award”, and “I have increased my ‘green’ activity and hope to go down this route further in the future”.**

The initial target to involve the ICT technologies in the delivery of the project was managed through the widespread dissemination of information through e-newsletters, e-mail databases and TSE and partner websites. The final beneficiary survey was run online and returned a sample size of 14%, a higher percentage than the paper-based survey carried out at the end of phase 1 in 2005.

Paragraph 3.3 records the issues experienced around building online network groups and information libraries at the outset of the project. The significant increase in demand and take up of IT based courses during the project’s life demonstrates how much more tourism SMEs are using ICT as a tool for communication, marketing and information provision.

## 5. Project outcomes

### 5.1 Aims, objectives and impacts

The project aimed to 'promote innovation and adaptability in work, develop entrepreneurship and enhance skills to grow rural tourism businesses in the South East that recognise the need to continually improve to provide a robust, sustainable tourism industry in vulnerable landscapes'. This aim was supported by five project objectives covering:

- the engagement of rural tourism businesses with their local landscape management rural support agencies;
- the identification and delivery of key business management skill and knowledge requirements;
- the encouragement of take-up of further learning;
- the provision of an outreach service for rural businesses;
- the development of a web based information network.

In addition there was an aim to support Policy Field 4, Measure 1 of the ESF Programme to 'update and upgrade employee skills, with an emphasis on female businesses managers'. Evaluation of how these aims and objectives were achieved has been drawn from the project output data, the online beneficiary and partner surveys, and further telephone interviews with partners and businesses. The interviews with businesses are set out as brief case studies in Appendix 4.

### 5.2 Updating and upgrading skills

786 Individuals from 622 SMEs were trained through the project, of which 526 were women. The feedback from the courses and the beneficiary survey show that satisfaction levels were high. 88% of beneficiaries said the courses met or exceeded their expectations and 91% said the content was quite valuable or invaluable. As project outputs were met and course feedback and surveys show a high level of satisfaction, it is reasonable to conclude that the skills and knowledge of the beneficiaries was updated and upgraded.

### 5.3 Engaging rural tourism businesses

- 622 businesses participated in 115 courses delivered by the Rural Welcome project over four years spread across the 10 protected areas in the region. All protected areas hosted *AONB Awareness, Welcoming Walkers and Cyclists*, and *Sourcing, Preparing and Serving Local Produce* courses during the first phase of the project and all except Chichester Harbour AONB went on to host *Green Business* and e-marketing courses.

- A number of protected area partners reported an increase in the number of contacts made with local tourism businesses. The Surrey Hills, East Hampshire, Sussex Downs, Kent Downs and High Weald AONBs all specifically identified the project as the means of generating closer contact.
- The North Wessex Downs, Surrey Hills, Kent Downs, Sussex Downs and East Hampshire AONBs linked greater awareness and promotion of the areas' footpaths by businesses with the *Welcoming Walkers and Cyclists* courses.
- The increase in green business practices among tourism businesses was most marked in the Sussex Downs, East Hampshire, Kent Downs and Chichester Harbour AONBs where the number of businesses involved in the green accreditation scheme was greatest. In the case of the Kent and Sussex Downs, this was partly as a result of officers working on the ground to promote the scheme. Those officers identified the entry level *Green Business* courses as an important first step in getting businesses involved in their programmes.

#### 5.4 Identification and delivery of key management skills

- 786 individuals from SMEs benefited from a range of 11 courses delivered throughout the programme. 526 of these were women, a specific target audience for the project.
- The original project bid identified four courses to be delivered but committed to regular assessment, feedback and discussion with businesses to identify other skills areas that needed to be addressed.
- Through the life of the project three of the initial four courses – *AONB Awareness*, *Marketing in a Protected Area* and *Green Business* – were altered to take account of trends and business needs.
- The *AONB Awareness* course evolved into one entitled *Local Distinctiveness* and incorporated greater information on market segments and their application to the area under the spotlight.
- The *Marketing in a Protected Area* course moved through an early emphasis on attracting walkers and cyclists to a strong focus in the final two years of the project on e-marketing.
- The *Green business* course developed into a new *Understanding Green* course for entry level businesses as general awareness and knowledge about sustainable business operations grew, and those already operating sustainably were offered the *Marketing your Green Credentials* course.

90% of those businesses surveyed said that they had carried out changes or developments as a result of the course, which suggests that the beneficiaries had taken on and were using the skills they had acquired. 84% of the sample represents 707 individual beneficiaries of the 786 trained taking some positive action as a result of the course. Table 7 below identifies the actions taken.

<b>Table 7: Business changes or developments</b>		
<b>Base</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>100</b>
Introduction of bedroom browser	32	21
Walkers/Cyclists Welcome charter	20	13
Measures to cater for walkers/cyclists	56	36
Increased use of local produce	67	43
Introduction of green business practice	54	35
Green Tourism Business Scheme accreditation	19	12
Developed website	13	8
Changed website	60	39
Optimised website	44	28
Created blog/podcast	4	3
Other	15	10
None	16	10

Comments on the actions taken as a result of the courses included David Dare from Oxfordshire Narrowboats who said, “You have the germ of an idea and the course helps you to take it forward”. The course inspired David to pursue the idea of a courtesy bus for walkers using public transport.

Christine Bennet from Burgate Farmhouse said the courses had helped her to improve her website and enabled her to target her customers more efficiently; “no wasted energy or postage”, these days 95% of the people I have direct contact with want to make a booking.”

Alex Everett of West Meadows B+B was so impressed with the new ideas that were introduced to her on these courses that she created her own personal follow-up programme. As a result of attending the Rural Welcome IT courses, she registered with the Trip Advisor website “in order to monitor feedback from clients. This has been very useful,” she says. Alex is currently looking into blogging software, “which will make us more user friendly and hopefully will bring in more traffic to our web pages.” Alex says, “that it is too soon to say if her hard work has improved profitability but that the courses have enabled her to focus her efforts on serving current clients and have helped her to reach new ones more efficiently”.

## 5.5 Take-up of further learning

The beneficiary survey showed that 57% of the sample went on to take-up further learning and business support options. Multiplied up to match the total business numbers of 622, this represents a total of 354 businesses who were encouraged to develop their skills further.

The table below shows, of those surveyed, the areas of further support and learning in which they participated.

<b>Table 8: Further training and support</b>		
	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Base</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>100</b>
Welcome E-learning	26	17
Smarter Marketing	29	19
Welcome Host	19	12
Welcome Host Plus	2	1
Welcome All	14	9
Welcome International	3	2
Welcome Management	4	3
Learn Direct courses	11	7
Partners in Success	22	14
Partners in Success Plus	5	3
Further education courses	5	3
Business Link support	27	17
Local initiatives	18	12
Market town courses	2	1
Green accreditation	21	14
Welcome Sussex	1	1
Other	6	4
None	66	43

## 5.6 Provision of outreach services

As recorded in paragraph 3.2, the provision of outreach services to engage and support beneficiaries was not delivered as originally envisaged via an outreach Rural Tourism Adviser but through TSE and partner staff. That the beneficiary and business targets were reached, and a

higher number of businesses than anticipated took up further training and skills support suggests that these alternative arrangements were successful.

## **5.7 Development of web-based networks**

Paragraph 3.3 describes the way that online networking for participating businesses was developed. This was recognised as the area where the least progress was made on a specific Rural Welcome web space that encouraged repeat visits and an online forum. Information was provided for those businesses that wanted it, but there was no significant generation of online networks actively used by businesses. Having said that, this was true in many disciplines where hopes of generating virtual information communities never materialised.

However, 349 beneficiaries have attended IT courses during the project and clearly businesses are using the web more and more for communication and marketing, reflected in the rise in the number of e-marketing courses in the latter half of the project period.

## 6. Conclusions

- The Rural Welcome project achieved all its substantive targets and met its stated aims and objectives. It supported 622 rural tourism businesses and 786 individuals through training courses that were thought valuable by a very large majority of the participants. A survey of beneficiaries revealed only two negative responses out of a sample size of 155. The scores for the quality, relevance and content of the courses delivered through the project show a consistently high satisfaction level.
- The project aim to attract a majority of women onto the courses to help them develop their business skills and entrepreneurship was achieved with the target number being exceeded. Often running an SME as well as a family home, the courses clearly proved a useful and time efficient way for this group of managers and owners to acquire new skills at no cost to their working or domestic lives.
- The project was set up to receive regular evaluation and assessment from its partners and industry networks to ensure the course content was effective and relevant. It was sufficiently flexible to develop and deliver a range of new courses in response to business demand that built on the original concept. E-marketing and green business training grew in importance as the project developed and the course content changed to reflect that.
- 90% of those attending courses reported having taken some action to change or develop their business operation as a result. This testifies to the usefulness and relevance of the course material. A number of those changes related to new or improved IT and green business practices.
- Working closely with partners from the protected area offices added value to the programme and enabled partner staff to generate closer working relationships with tourism businesses in their area. This was one of the key aims and objectives of the project and its achievement is in large part is a result of the partnership approach and the visibility of AONB and National Park staff in the process.
- An experienced and central administration and financial management service at TSE was able to collect and maintain course records that allow a clear evaluation of the achievements of the project. The proposed collection of time sheets from businesses who had recorded what follow-up actions they had taken, and the time it had taken them to do it, was not continued after early feedback from the SMEs made it clear that they were unable to find the time required to track their activities, and that their working day did not divide into the type of activities that could be easily recorded. This resulted in a shortfall in the estimated number of training hours delivered. However, the survey results showing that 90% of businesses took some form of action after attending a course shows that the time was being spent, even if its formal recording was not possible.

- The addition of new partners to the project through the signing of a Public Match Funding Certificate proved to be something that required too much administration time to make the effort worthwhile. In each case of a new partner engaging formally with the project the bid needed to be re-drawn and re-submitted to GOSE and all Public Match Funding Certificates needed to be re-signed. Consequently, new partners were brought into the project informally, assisting in the project's delivery but being unable to offer match funding. This is an issue that should be addressed. The dynamics of a four year project running in a fast changing sector like tourism mean that project emphasis shifts both geographically and in terms of course content. In the public arena agencies regularly reform and change as part of reorganisations. Efforts to make the addition of new partners an easier process should be considered.
- The flexibility in delivery is evident in the Rural Welcome project and it is important not only to take account of changes in industry and consumer needs and behaviour, but also to be able to accommodate changes in national and regional strategic direction. The rapid rise in the spread and use of Broadband by businesses and consumers was able to be reflected in the delivery of an increasing number of e-marketing and web focused training courses.
- Lessons should be learnt from the project's difficulties in establishing an effective online business discussion forum and information library with course participants. SME owners and managers have very little spare time to engage in online discussions or to research the sector and current market trends. They are too busy running the business. Training courses are clearly a means to pass this information on to an SME as they are willing to commit to a short, concentrated period of learning. Expecting them to spend time at the computer pursuing further learning in their own time is not practical. There are some very good examples of short, online learning packages developed by TSE since the start of this project, but to be successful they need to have the businesses needs and time limitations very much in mind.

## Appendix 1: Project partners

- Chichester Harbour Conservancy
- Chiltern District Council
- East Hampshire AONB Office
- East Hampshire District Council
- East Sussex County Council
- Green Island Partnership
- Hampshire County Council
- High Weald AONB Unit
- Isle of Wight AONB
- Isle of Wight Tourism
- Kent Downs AONB
- Lewes District Council
- New Forest District Council
- North Downs Way Office
- North Wessex Downs AONB
- Test Valley Borough Council
- Sparsholt College
- Surrey County Council
- Surrey Hills AONB Partnership
- Sussex Downs Conservation Board
- Wealden District Council
- West Berkshire District Council
- Wycombe District Council