Report to NRN Membership

July 2009

We gratefully acknowledge the financial or other support of the following:

Commission for
Rural Communities
Tackling rural disadvantage

NORTHUMBRIA LARDER
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The Northern Rural Network

In 2000 the NRN was established to:

- Provide an independent forum to promote learning and understanding of rural development issues

- Showcase applied research that informs analysis of the current state of rural economies and communities

- Facilitate the exchange of best practice and highlight innovation

- Provide a networking forum

- Shape new research agendas

In 2008 with support from One NorthEast and the Northern Rock Foundation the NRN moved into a new phase that will see significant new developments:

- A major survey of northern rural businesses to collect intelligence

- Research-based activity with businesses to identify problems and stimulate tangible action

- Conferences on current issues, raising the profile of the rural North and sharing the understanding of issues

- The marriage of research and action to engage communities and businesses who want the University to help them to tackle practical challenges

- Short courses for practitioners, policy makers and researchers

- The development of the NRN website to increase membership and awareness

- National and international networking and dissemination to communicate with researchers, practitioners and policy makers about the NRN approach

The NRN project team consists of the following Centre for Rural Economy staff:

Dr. Jane Atterton (project leader, rural business survey manager)
Dr. Nicola Thompson (project delivery and evaluation)
Dr. Kayo Murakami (project administration and financial reporting)
Arthur Affleck (business survey research assistant)
Nicola Parker (secretarial and administrative support)

In addition Terry Carroll (independent consultant) works on the NRN project 2.5 days per week. Terry leads on event organisation. Dr. Cathy Sharp (Research for Real) acts as the project 'critical friend'. The role of the critical friend is to provide constructive advice to the management team on NRN development for the first two years of the

project. Members of the NRN management team meet with ONE North East on a quarterly basis.

There is a project steering group which meets twice a year. During the first year the membership of the steering group was as follows:

- Peter Jackson (chair, ONE North East board member, Northumberland County Council member, farmer)
- Frances Rowe (ONE North East)
- Angus Collingwood Cameron (Country Land and Business Association)
- Steve Urwin (Business Link)
- Victoria Catesby (County Durham Economic Partnership)
- Christine Venus (Natural England)
- Sandy Rutherford (Hexham Courant, Hexham Business Forum)
- Mark Shucksmith (School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University, Commission for Rural Communities Commissioner)
- Jane Atterton (NRN Management)
- Terry Carroll (NRN Management)
- Nicola Thompson (NRN Management)

Fuller project details are available from http://nrn.ncl.ac.uk

The Purpose of this Report

We have chosen to produce this report for the following reasons:

1) to report back to the members the main messages to come out of the feedback exercises we have conducted over the last year. We also want to tell you about how we are responding to these messages

2) to keep members informed about the work that is already happening on the future of the network and what that might mean for NRN in the short and long term

3) to invite members to send comments on these topics

The third phase of the NRN project has now run for a complete year. During this time there have been some important developments in how the project is run. These include:

- Undertaking a major survey of rural businesses in the North East region as part of the project

- Convening a formal steering group with a stronger role in guiding the project

- Increasing the scope of Network activity to embrace more localised follow up work

- A complete overhaul of our web presence to include a web booking service for events and enhanced feedback features

- Using a 'critical friend' to help us think through how the Network operates, how it is valued, and how our work could be developed

- Developing a more structured system for gathering membership feedback for events

However, some important challenges still remain and will be the subject of our work over the next two years of the project. These include:

- Disseminating and building on the rural business survey to ensure that its key messages reach all the relevant people and form the basis of tangible actions.

- Developing a programme of local activities that of are of positive benefit to the areas that we work in.

- Continuing to build on an already strong programme of events using feedback on how they could be improved from the membership and our critical friend.

- Planning for the future of the network, in particular, future funding arrangements

Section One

Feedback from Events May 2008 – May 2009

Over the first year of the project there were four large seminars:

1)   The Matthew Taylor Review – Centre for Life, Newcastle, 25 September 2008

2)   Renewable Energy – Riverside Cricket Ground, Chester Le Street, 26 November 2008

3)   Rural Land Use – Park Inn, York – 12 March 2009

4)   Rural Economies – Newcastle Race Course, Newcastle – 28 April 2009

In addition we have run two short courses and a follow up event on the implications of the Matthew Taylor Review in Northumberland. Full details, reports, and in some cases recordings, of these events are available from the archive section of the web site.

Following every event a web based (survey monkey) questionnaire is sent to all those who attended. We find that about half of the participants return a survey. In this we ask a combination of 'closed' questions on the day overall and the quality of each presentation/session. We also ask attendees to write about the best and worst features and if they have any further comments.

NRN membership and attendance at events has increased significantly since the project started in 2000. This strongly indicates that overall the Network is increasing in popularity with some people coming to multiple events and new people being attracted. The responses to survey monkey also show that overall satisfaction levels are high with attendees particularly valuing the substance of many of the presentations and the opportunity to network.

This section is based on analysis of the key messages from feedback questionnaires combined with the perspective provided by Dr. Cathy Sharp, the project critical friend, in her end of year one report. The number of responses over the year means that we can not report on every comment and suggestion made. Instead we have sorted the feedback into themes and identified common or recurring messages. These have usually been made in response to more than one event and/or by a number of different participants. In the remainder of this section we identify what you, the membership, have said and how we, the project team, are responding.

   1) **"found all the speakers interesting and relevant. The entrepreneurs were particularly inspiring and provided a useful insight"**

Most of the positive comment we receive relates directly to the speakers and the quality of their input. It is clear that people learn a great deal from listening to the substantive presentations. What is also apparent (from the ratings given to the individual speakers) is that attendees really appreciate hearing from those running their own businesses and projects. Other types of speaker are also well received (and some of the case studies have had more mixed reviews) but, overall, there is a clear appetite for hearing directly

from those involved in running businesses and/or setting up grass roots project. The only caveat to this message is that some think that, while interesting, case studies raise the question of 'so what' or 'how does this relate directly to the theme of the day'?

How we are responding: we will continue to ensure that we include case study presentations. However, we will be careful in their selection and brief these contributors more fully on the overall purpose of the day to try and ensure that their contribution is more closely tied into the event. As detailed below we are also going to be more focused on defining more specific event themes, stating a set of objectives and a specified target audience.

2) "good chance to network"

For all the events and courses a substantial number of attendees identify networking, or meeting people, as one of their three best features.

How we are responding: For several years we have allowed substantial space in the programme for networking in recognition that allowing time for informal, open discussion is the single most important thing that we can do. However, some of your comments have also indicated that there is more we could do to facilitate successful networking. We are increasingly aware that the lay out of the room and the provision of tables to sit round over breaks and lunchtime helps attendees to talk to each other. Over the next year we will try, where possible, to move away from theatre style room layouts towards clusters of tables. As we explain below we think this will also help in addressing some of your other criticisms. We will try out other ways of structuring and facilitating sessions in order to promote varied conversations amongst delegates.

3) "make the speakers use the PA system"

It is very apparent that at several events a number of attendees have not been able to hear adequately. There are also some comments about not being able to see the screen but these are vastly outnumbered by the comments on audibility.

How we are responding: In some venues this is a relatively simple case of being more disciplined about reiterating to the venue the importance of having access to a working PA system and then making the speakers use the microphones. Over the last year we have used conference venues which in three of the four seminars had an appropriate PA system (which on at least one occasion we simply did not use effectively). As we explain in section two over the next two years we may not continue to use dedicated conference venues. However, when this is the case we commit to doing the following: assessing how may places are available at an event on the basis of how many people will be able to sit comfortably within a certain distance of the speaker and the screen; briefing all speakers on the importance of speaking loudly and clearly; inviting those who have hearing difficulties to advise us on how we can best meet their needs prior to the event. This can be done through filling out a section on the on line booking form or contacting the organisers directly through northern@ncl.ac.uk. We will also continue to provide paper copies of power point slides in the delegate packs provided at registration. Those who would appreciate having access to these in larger print on the day will be invited to state this in the online booking form or to contact the organisers direct.

4) **"the question and answer session was poorly chaired"**
   "unable to ask questions"

Comments of this nature were made about a number of the events. It is apparent that having traditional Q and A time in the programme is not sufficient especially in the bigger events.

How we are responding: Even where we allowed a substantial amount of time attendees were clearly frustrated at the lack of opportunities for them to contribute and the way in which the questions and answers were handled. Dr. Cathy Sharp will be working with us over the next year to develop other ways of running questions and answers. This may well include working in table based small groups to formulate and respond to questions, using the reverse panel concept used at an event several years ago or asking a speaker to address questions pre identified by the NRN members rather than answer questions after a traditional presentation. We are particularly open to other ideas and suggestions on this.

5) **"the sheer amount of time being talked at throughout the day"**
   "too long sat listening, some activity would have been better"

Our events have, to date, been heavily focused on the delivery of a series of power point presentations.

How we are responding: It is important to be clear that the power point presentation will continue to feature because many of the attendees indicate that strong substantive content, delivered in this format, is valued. However, we are going to make three changes which we hope will reduce the amount of time being 'talked at' and help to engage attendees more fully in the content of the day. The first change is to reduce the number of presentations and mix these with more interactive, participative activities such as those suggested in the response to point four above. Again all suggestions for how this could be done are particularly welcome. The second change is to get contributors to talk about/get the attendees to engage with their issues and lessons in other ways. This may involve 'speakers' in running exercises or giving tasks to those attending or the (re) introduction of short field trips. Where there is a good case for a traditional power point, and this is the speakers preferred option, we will be providing them with more guidance on 'do's and don'ts'. We have been providing guidance to speakers for a number of years but the responses to the feedback questionnaire give us a sounder 'evidence base' on which to base this.

6) **"the open space lost it's way a bit"**
   "the end discussion didn't work"

We will seek to make NRN more participatory in future, and acknowledge that when we have done this over the past year some valid criticisms have been made. There is definite room for improvement in how we facilitate participation.

How we are responding: The simple answer is that we fully intend to invest time and thought into the careful design of the activities and their place in the overall programme. It is critical that we are able to fully explain the purpose of any participatory activity and

how it contributes to the objectives for the day. We have a number of ideas for how we could improve. This is another area where we are working closely with Dr. Cathy Sharp and is, again, something we know that the members themselves could usefully input ideas and suggestions. It will also be important that attendees give honest feedback on how the participatory elements went and how they can be of value.

7) **"didn't seem to lead to any clear conclusions"**
   "lack of focus"
   "the event struggled to tie the contributions together"

How we are responding: This group of comments seems to stem from a sense that it is often unclear what the overall aim and objectives of the day are and who the event is designed for. Future programmes will be more explicit on both purpose and audience. Those who contribute through speaking and/or facilitation will be asked to address these objectives. Hopefully this will also mean that the conclusions of the day can be more easily identified and articulated by either a speaker or through attendee discussion and feedback. It has been noted at several past events that many attendees leave before the final session. This distilling of conclusions at future events will be made easier if people engaged with the full day.

8) **"The academic papers did not relate to practical application"**
   "The presentation by X was nothing new"

There were a number of comments about the presentations from the RELU programme (rural land use event). These related to the perception that these were too 'academic' with too few links to practical action. There are also a number of comments about some of the presentations from public sector organisations stating that the attendee had not learned anything new or found them frustrating.

How we are responding: With respect to the comments about presentations being too academic, we hope that this will be improved by having clearer event objectives and a more explicit target audience. This may well mean that future research presentations can more easily make links to the work of the attendees. The range and breadth of our membership, and perhaps the nature of some research projects, will however always make this a challenge that has no quick fix. It is certainly a lesson which we will learn from in designing business survey feedback and dissemination.

With respect to the public sector, again this may be an issue of being clearer on objectives and who we envisage the audience to be. More participatory sessions and innovative Q and A may also be a way of providing opportunities for critical engagement with policy developments. As with all these points your feedback over the next few months, and as we try new things, will be critical to how we approach policy input into NRN events.

Section Two

The Future of the Network

In this section we provide a brief introduction to the work that is already happening on the future of the network and what that might mean for NRN in the short and long term.

Since the end of 2008 the NRN has been working in conjunction with ONE North East and the Regional and Special Projects team at Newcastle University on the future of the Network beyond the current project period. Funding runs out in March 2011. No decisions have yet been made about the Network beyond this date and a number of options are being considered. However, over the next year the following may happen:

1) charging for attendance at an event may be trialled

2) a cap on the number of people attending from a particular organisation or sector may be trialled

3) a discussion forum may be set up for Members to comment on what should happen to NRN post 2011

4) members may be approached by the NRN team or an external consultant to give their feedback on a number of funding options for the network

5) members may be approached by the NRN or an external consultant to give their feedback on a number of administrative/governance options for the network.

Key to the decision making process will be the NRN steering group and the management team and Director at the Centre for Rural Economy.

In the shorter term the NRN continues to face the challenge of fully funding events. There are two aspects to this which we would like to make the membership aware of:

1) While the project funders pay some of the costs of the large seminars there is an expectation that each of these will attract in the region of £2000 in external sponsorship. We will be continuing to approach organisations to provide such sponsorship.

2) Even with project funds and external sponsorship there is an insufficient amount in the budget to continue to use conference venues and hotels. This is due to the high numbers of attendees and the cost of catering and room hire at such venues. We will be looking to run events in alternative locations (including some more rural venues). On the plus side this may mean more direct control over the sourcing of the food and drink. But is also likely to mean that the venues are less conveniently located, there is not the same professional service, there are no PA systems and there is a general decline in the level of comfort. A related issue is the consequences of the popularity of events for the budget. We have been extremely reluctant to declare an event 'full' but in several cases the capacity of the venue combined with the delegate costs has meant that this has been our only option. It may be that the events in the next two years have to be smaller in

terms of numbers of attending. This is because of the costs associated with each attendee, the capacity of the kind of venues we will need to use and the need to ensure that all attendees can see and hear. We will work hard to ensure this is done in a fair and sensible way but this is unlikely to be 'first come, first served' as in the past. The NRN is highly valued by the CRE director and the University but it requires considerable time input from a number of CRE staff. Whilst recognising the value that members place on the independence of CRE as the hosting organisation for the Network we are also exploring the possibility of involving other organisations in running the project.

If you have any thoughts, comments, ideas on any of the content of this report we are very keen to hear from you. In particular we would like to hear your feedback on:

1)   Ideas on (and offers of) venues for events

2)   Your ideas for how to make events more participatory particularly question and answer sessions

3)   Which other organisations could be involved in NRN post 2011?

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