

Opportunities available under the Rural Development Programme

THE Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) is a seven-year, £3.9 billion programme of investment in the rural environment and in rural businesses and communities. Dominic Rowland describes the support delivered by the Regional Development Agencies, and, in particular, outlines the opportunities for the livestock sector.

DOMINIC ROWLAND



Funding is available to support the livestock sector



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PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

The Rural Development Programme for England is structured around three objectives (referred to as 'axes'):

- **Axis 1.** Improving the competitiveness of the farming and forestry sectors (delivered by the Regional Development Agencies [RDAs]);
- **Axis 2.** Improving the environment and the countryside (delivered by Natural England and the Forestry Commission);
- **Axis 3.** Rural quality of life and diversification of the rural economy (delivered by the RDAs).

There is also a fourth, cross-cutting axis – the 'Leader' approach – which provides support for bottom-up, community-led proposals. Each axis is subdivided into a number of measures that essentially identify specific areas of activity.

Funding

The RDPE runs from 2007 to 2013. It is jointly funded by DEFRA and the European Union (through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development) and implements the so-called 'second pillar' of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. In England, funding for the programme also comes from receipts from voluntary modulation of the single payment.

Most of the programme's budget – around 80 per cent – is being allocated to the objectives of axis 2, with around 10 per cent allocated to axis 1 and 10 per cent to axis 3. DEFRA ministers decided that a significant part of the

RDA-managed funding should be ring-fenced for support for the livestock sector. This funding is allocated to three themes, which were developed following industry consultation:

- Competitiveness;
- Nutrient management;
- Animal health and welfare.

Currently, the RDAs are forecasting that some £118 million will be spent on livestock sector support over the duration of the programme. Of this, around £56 million is allocated to the competitiveness theme, £33 million to animal health and welfare, and £29 million to nutrient management.

OBJECTIVES

At the heart of the programme is Environmental Stewardship – a suite

of agri-environment schemes that encourage farmers to participate in environmental land management. Environmental Stewardship has a range of primary objectives:

- Wildlife conservation;
- Natural resource protection;
- Maintenance and enhancement of the landscape;
- Historic environment protection;
- Promotion of access to and understanding of the countryside.

Secondary objectives are genetic conservation and flood management. Support is also provided, through axis 2, for the English Woodland Grant Scheme, which promotes the sustainable creation and management of woodland, and for the Hill Farm Allowance, which provides support to farmers in upland areas. This is planned to be replaced by an uplands strand of entry level stewardship.

Example 1. Funding for meat processing

In the east of England, Woburn Country Foods was awarded substantial RDPE funding towards a new meat-processing unit. The new unit has created six new jobs, brought a redundant agricultural building back into use and is helping more people to enjoy locally produced meat. It is good news for local farmers in their role as custodians of the environment. They now have a more secure outlet for their meat, meaning more land will be kept for grazing livestock. The unit is able to supply the onsite farm shop, as well as farmers' markets, restaurants, hotels, pubs and schools, with a range of fresh meat, poultry and game from a number of local farmers and game suppliers. The new facility will add value by processing meat from locally reared sources, which can then either be sold under the Woburn Country Foods brand name, or farmers can have the oven-ready portions back to sell under their own labels.

Programme priorities

To bring about improvements in the competitiveness of each individual livestock sector to help them compete in the marketplace by:

- Training and transferring information and technology to improve the level of skills on farms and the supply chain, and encourage the uptake of technology which can increase competitiveness;
- Developing on-farm and off-farm processing where this can add value to livestock products;
- Developing abattoirs and other key elements of the supply chain, to improve supply chain efficiency and animal health and welfare;
- Developing new livestock products and supply chain processes, involving collaboration between farmers, retailers and processors;
- Making investments on farms that reduce energy consumption and increase the level of renewable energy use;
- Improving water and waste resource management, leading to reduced costs and environmental gains;
- Supporting non-farming diversification activities that improve competitiveness, and encouraging farmers to focus on marketing and local opportunities for selling quality products directly to consumers.

To assist farmers in meeting their changing responsibilities and facilitate improved animal health and welfare via:

- Support for training and information and technology transfer, to improve the level of skills on farms and in the supply chain to improve animal health and welfare;
- Investments on farms that demonstrate a direct relationship to improving health and welfare, to encourage farmers to adopt practices that improve the health status of their livestock and improve the quality of products for consumers and other processing businesses;
- Cooperation to encourage prophylactic disease management and encouraging collaboration between farms to help with the prevention and management of economically significant diseases;
- Cooperation for access to equipment and machinery to improve animal health and welfare, and encouraging collaboration between farms to look at investment in equipment that can help manage health and welfare.

To provide support for farmers in enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of on-farm management of nutrients via:

- Support, training, information and technology transfer in order to improve the level of skills on farms, leading to improved efficiency in the management of manures, slurries, nutrients and soils, which, in turn means reduced costs and environmental gains;
- Support for investments on livestock farms for improved management of slurries, manures, nutrients and soils, and potential greenhouse gas reductions;
- Cooperation for the development of new products, processes and technologies to encourage collaboration between farms to help with nutrient management.

The box above outlines the detailed objectives for each of the headline priority themes.

The focus of this article is the package of support delivered by the RDAs to support the farming, forestry and food sectors and the broader rural economy under axis 1 and axis 3, and in particular the funding targeted to the livestock sector.

THE LIVESTOCK SECTOR

In developing the package for the livestock sector, the RDAs are primarily using the following measures:

- Vocational training and information actions;
- Modernisation of agricultural holdings;
- Adding value to agricultural and forestry products;
- Cooperation for the development of new products, processes and technologies.

Delivery

To develop the priorities at a regional level, the RDAs, Natural England, the Forestry Commission and Government Offices consulted widely on

the programme. The RDAs took advice from livestock farmers, industry bodies, farming representatives and veterinary surgeons to establish priority objectives for regional livestock support. These consultations led to the regional implementation plans available on the websites of the Government Offices for the regions.

The programme was formally launched at the start of 2008, and, since then, the RDAs have approved projects and programmes worth over £200 million, covering all sectors of the economy in rural areas (see boxed examples). The RDAs are delivering RDPE funding through a mixture of project applications and commissioned activity, so it is vital for potential applicants to contact their RDA to discuss ideas from an early stage.

APPLICATION AND REQUIREMENTS

The link to improved profitability is a key factor for any investment, even where the themes of nutrient management and animal health and

Example 2. Northwest Livestock Programme

The RDPE Northwest Livestock Programme integrates all the livestock funding into one programme, including animal health planning, to improve the health and welfare of farmed livestock significantly and contribute to business profitability and product quality. The programme is available to dairy, beef, sheep, pig and poultry enterprises in north-west England. The animal health planning will be carried out by the farmer's own veterinary surgeon (provided that they participate in the programme), in partnership with a technical adviser from the Scottish Agricultural College or its delivery partners. The animal health plans highlight the priorities that justify the potential performance grants from the RDPE from the investments on farms. The work started in May 2009 and will run until March 2013 unless the target 2000 plans are delivered before this. An information and communication technology network (<http://livestocknw.co.uk>) acts as channel for communication.



The RDPE Northwest Livestock Programme is available to dairy, beef, sheep, pig and poultry enterprises

Example 3. Livestock Health South East

Livestock Health South East (www.livestockhealthsoutheast.org.uk) is a package of animal health and welfare training for livestock farmers, worth around £830,000 over two years. Livestock farmers in the region will be able to access the most up-to-date information to help them maintain and improve the health of their stock, ensuring the sustainability of farming in the region. Farmers can choose to attend meetings and discussion groups, complete online training and receive one-to-one veterinary advice, tailored to their needs. Livestock Health South East has brought together the key livestock health organisations, working together to deliver a coordinated programme of training and knowledge transfer activities.

The programme is being provided by a consortium of veterinary practices and industry organisations, and is being managed overall by the Westpoint Veterinary Group in Horsham, West Sussex. Recent and forthcoming training events around the region will cover subjects such as tuberculosis prevention, ewe and lamb management to optimise health and welfare, and dairy cattle mobility.

welfare are the more explicit drivers. There are therefore a range of requirements that prospective applications will need to meet, as follows:

- All projects will need to be developed under the umbrella of a comprehensive plan. This may be thematic, such as a herd or flock health plan, nutrient management plan, or business plan;

- All projects will need to demonstrate clear alignment with the priorities for the RDPE livestock package and regional implementation plans;

- All projects must demonstrate actions that improve or deliver standards beyond those laid out in legislative requirements, including single payment scheme cross-compliance.

Example 4. South West Healthy Livestock Initiative

The South West Regional Development Agency has committed £12.17 million of funding over five years for the South West Healthy Livestock Initiative (www.swhli.co.uk). The livestock sector is crucial in south-west England, with 25 per cent of the national population of livestock being reared within the region. The industry is worth approximately £2 billion to the region at the farm gate. The objectives of the South West Healthy Livestock Initiative are to improve standards of health and welfare among farmed animals by optimising levels of animal performance, and improving the quality of meat, milk, hides, fleece, and so on, leading to better marketability and higher prices, and reducing direct costs and wastage. Design and delivery of the initiative is being overseen by a broad-based stakeholder group.



Improved standards of health and welfare among farmed animals are key objectives in the South West Healthy Livestock Initiative

Projects will not receive investment support if:

- They only serve to meet the minimum requirements that are already laid out in legislation and associated guidance;
- They propose a simple replacement of current practice rather than devising improvements;
- The investments do not contribute to improving the profitability of the business or sector.

REGIONAL DELIVERY

Regional partners in the livestock sector have indicated that they prefer regional delivery of solutions as this approach offers further opportunities for local businesses, is based on expert knowledge of local issues and delivers added value for money. That said, projects that effectively cover most of the country can be delivered in a number of ways, for example:

- Projects that are consistent across the regions can be delivered through regionally devised mechanisms, such as herd and flock health plan delivery;

- Projects that meet more than one region's priorities may have a consistent deliverer, particularly across adjoining borders;

- Projects that cover similar issues can have specific and different delivery requirements in individual regions, such as the RDPE skills programmes co-ordinated by Lantra.

A range of programmes and projects to benefit the livestock farming sector are already in place, as those described in boxed examples throughout this article.

REAL OPPORTUNITY

Substantial funding is available from the RDPE to help improve the livestock farming industry in England. This is a real opportunity to put the industry on a more sustainable long-term footing. Potential applicants should read the regional implementation plan or RDPE prospectus for their region, and then contact their RDA (contact details for each of the RDAs are available at www.defra.gov.uk/rural/rdpe). This will help ensure that the projects make a real contribution to the programme's objectives.