

RURAL BUSINESS FACILITATION SERVICE (LANCASHIRE AND NORTH MANCHESTER)

Introduction

This document explains what the Rural Business Facilitation Service is and what you need to do to take part in it.

What is the Rural Business Facilitation Service?

The Rural Business Facilitation Service (RBFS) aims to provide a 'hub' of expertise and first port of call for any rural business in Lancashire and North Manchester seeking to improve and develop their business. We can provide you with initial advice to help you improve your farm or rural business performance and efficiency. We will then help you locate sources of Government funding for detailed advice (such as help with business plans or marketing strategies) to help you develop your ideas and put them into action. Where no existing relevant Government service exists, we will provide it. We will also help you with applications for investment grants, agri-environment schemes, etc., from other Government sources.

The service should ultimately help you to diversify your income base through a variety of means including adding value processing, business diversification and agri-environmental measures. This will help the long term development of Lancashire's rural economy.

Basic eligibility criteria

The scheme is geographically restricted to Lancashire, Blackpool, Blackburn and the districts of Wigan, Bolton, Bury, Rochdale and Oldham. Within this area any rural SME, will be eligible for support.

All applicants will be SMEs as defined in Annex 1 of Commission Regulation 70/2001. Larger companies will not be eligible. In summary, an SME:

- has fewer than 250 employees and
- has either an annual turnover not exceeding €40 million, or a balance-sheet total not exceeding €27 million, and
- is not owned at a rate of more than 25% by other companies.

In The Summer of 2004 the Office of National Statistics published the Rural and Urban Area Classification 2004, a revised classification of the nature of all electoral wards in England and Wales, further details of which can be found at <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/geography/nrudp.asp>. In order to be eligible for support from the RBFS, a businesses must either be situated in a ward which is categorised as being either rural or town and fringe in the Rural and Urban Area Classification 2004, (a copy of which is available from http://www.statistics.gov.uk/geography/downloads/Eng_Wal_Ward_xls.zip) or alternatively must be an 'Urban Businesses with Rural Interests' that is to say be a business situated in a ward categorised as urban, which undertakes activity that impacts in rural areas.

European law restricts the amount of State aid given to agricultural businesses.

Aid for agricultural businesses under the RBFS will be provided in accordance with Article 14 of EC regulation 1/2004 which governs the granting of technical support. Such support is limited to €100,000 (approximately £60,000) over three years for each business and covers education, training, farm replacement services, consultancy or advice, and for participating in competitions, exhibitions and trade fairs. Any agricultural business applying to the service will need to provide the RBFS with details of any such support they have received from any central or local Government source or other public funds over the last 3 years. The RBFS will help applicants with this information if necessary. The RBFS will also be able to help you define whether your business is considered to be agricultural or not.

Aid for non-agricultural rural businesses will be provided in accordance with EC Regulation 69/2001 which governs the granting of de minimis aid. De minimis aid is specific category of aid which does not require authorisation by the European Commission. Such support is limited to €100,000 (approximately £60,000) over three years for each business and can cover any type of activity. Any non-agricultural business applying to the service will need to provide the RBFS with details of any such support they have received from any central or local Government source or other public funds over the last 3 years.

Businesses which have already received aid up to these limits will not be eligible for the RBFS.

How the service operates

The RBFS will put you in touch with the best source of expertise to help you develop your business. Sometimes this will be an RBFS adviser. However, if a more specialist external source of support would be of more help to you we may refer you to them. This could happen at any stage of the process outlined below. (For example, the Lancashire and Blackpool Tourist Board would be better placed to help you with a tourism initiative or The North West Fantastic Foods Partnership would be a greater source of expertise for a business seeking to add value to a food product.)

Step 1 - Applying

To get involved, all you need to do is ring our helpline on 01200 426433 or contact us through the Lancashire Rural Futures website at www.lancshireruralfutures.co.uk. Lines will be open between 8.30am and 5.30 pm Monday to Friday from 10th January 2005.

Firstly, we will assess your eligibility for support from the RBFS. You should therefore have to hand details to prove your eligibility (address to prove rural location) and details of any technical support (for agricultural businesses) or de minimis support (for non-agricultural businesses) you have received in the last 3 years. There is no application form.

We will then ask you for some basic information including your contact details, evidence that you are eligible for support from the RBFS, an indication of the nature of your current business activity and a summary of any ideas that you may already have about how you want to develop your business. A copy of the contact sheet used to record this information is included as annex 1 below. We will then refer you to the Rural Business Facilitation Service Delivery Team, unless at that point we are sure that the best source of expertise lies elsewhere.

Within the RBFS delivery team, a nominated Case Officer will take overall responsibility for your enquiry and will decide what other internal or external expertise is required in order to assist the development of your business. The nominated Case Officer will be allocated, based on expertise, matched against individual applicant requirements. Case Officers will be specialists in either commercial or environmental delivery. If you are interested predominately in environmental improvements, you will be allocated to an environmental Case Officer. If you are interested predominately in commercial opportunities, you will be allocated to a commercial Case Officer.

Officer allocation is undertaken by the lead officer in each area office. Whatever the specialty of the nominated case officer all applicants will be given full access to other specialists within the team, and the wider partnership.

If the applicant is a land owner or farm tenant they will be required to forward a map of the land in their control to the RBFS. The RBFS will then use this map to check against County Council records to establish the likely environmental value of the holding prior to an environmental officer's visit. If no land is present the case will simply be handed on to a commercial advisor.

At times demand for support may exceed the capacity of the RBFS. If this happens, environmental prioritisation will restrict eligibility. Environmental prioritisation will be based on three criteria in descending order of importance: existence on the premises of the business to which the application refers, of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), existing Biological Heritage Site (BHS), or potential BHS based on the County Council's database Phase 1 Habitat Survey records.

Step 2 – Initial Appraisal Visit

The Case Officer will then visit your business to carry out an initial appraisal. At this point you will need to make some of your records available to the Case Officer. The Case Officer will explain exactly what he/she needs to see, but as a rule you can expect to need to supply a copy of your trading accounts prepared for tax purposes. Other further documentation may also be required including :-

- Copies of IACS documents;
- Copies of previous grant applications;
- Copies of documents relating to previous planning history;
- Copies of existing agri-environment scheme documents.

The time required to undertake full facilitation will vary depending on the scale, nature and complexity of your business. As a result, the time commitment you have to make will also vary significantly, but as a rule, the initial appraisal will take at least half a day to complete. The initial appraisal will cover:

- the potential to obtain benefits from providing environmental enhancements linked to mainstream schemes, e.g. Defra-administered agri-environment schemes; and/or
- opportunities to develop your business commercially and diversify or increase efficiency.

From this appraisal a list of actions will then be produced.

Step 3 – Implementing the Action Plan

Environmental Actions

Under CAP reform agri-environment measures will become of increasing significance to support farm incomes. As part of the facilitation service a dedicated team of specialists will help with applications for the full range of available measures including the new Entry Level and Higher Tier Schemes from DEFRA, Woodland Grant Schemes from the Forestry Commission and any other relevant form of environmental funding. In addition to the direct benefits of agri-environment income the environmental enhancement of these new measures will be employed to assist in the development of business proposals designed to compensate for any shifts in farm labour, associated with de-intensification, by for example matching planning submissions to linked environmental enhancement packages (to show planning gain). In addition environmental benefits will where appropriate (as in the case of the Rural Enterprise Scheme for example,) be incorporated within submissions for grant aid to strengthen these applications.

Commercial Actions

Once you know how you will develop your business, the Case Officer will contact existing Government business planning advice services (such as the Farm Business Advice Service) to help you develop your action list and turn it into detailed projects. The RBFS Case Officer will help Consultants assigned by these initiatives with background details. Once a report has been prepared, by either of these services this will be made available to the applicant and the RBFS Case Officer.

You and the RBFS Case Officer will then be able to assess the suitability of your projects for further development. At this point, you might find you have no further need for assistance from your Case Officer either because you know exactly what you need to do or because the Case Officer is able to point you in the direction of a specialist service.

However, if required, the Case Officer will at this point be able to provide more in depth advice to help you:

- Obtain advice and support from other agencies. This advice may consist of any specialisation that will assist delivery from any of the partner organisations. An example may be RSPB confirmation of the significance of breeding wader habitat in support of an agri-environment application.
- Develop planning applications for submission to the local authority in order to gain permission to carry out building work.
- Develop a business plan
- Develop a marketing strategy
- Develop linkages to other businesses. An example of which may include linking specialist milk producers with a local cheese maker and in turn linking these with retail outlets to reduce supply chain inefficiencies.
- Prepare applications for grant aid from other sources

We will help to pay for outside technical support from a list of approved consultants where the RBFS does not have the in house expertise required. We will provide this specialist support at a rate of 50% of the cost up to a maximum ceiling of £15,000. In this case, Lancashire County Council will pay the approved consultant upon completion of contract. You will then pay your 50% contribution to the County Council. This aid may include the following specialists :-

- architects
- structural engineers
- planning specialists
- marketeers
- specialist environmental advisors
- specialist technical consultants.

Step 4 – Monitoring

In order to ensure that all relevant information on the subsequent development of the supported project is supplied to the administrative hub and is incorporated into the claims process, the case officer will, when project support is completed, agree with each client monitoring arrangements which will allow quarterly checks to be made by the Hub on project activity and progress against outputs.

Other information

Upon completion the applicant will be informed of the total cost of assistance granted under the RBFS. In the event of further technical or de minimis aid being provided by another body after this point it will be the applicant's responsibility to report the level of assistance provided by the RBFS to the other body.

RBFS Contact Sheet

Office Allocated

Map Required?... YES / NO MAP RECEIVED?... YES / NO

Contact Name		Leader + File	YES / NO
Business Name		Holding Number	21/ /
Business P.O		Size (ha)	
Env. P.O		Grid Reference	

Holding Address	Contact Address (If different)
Postcode:	Postcode:
Home Telephone:	Home Telephone:
Mobile:	Fax:
Fax:	Registration Date:
E-Mail:	Holding Plan Received? Yes / No

IS THIS A NEW BUSINESS OR THE EXPANSION OF AN EXISTING BUSINESS?
Tick as appropriate

NEW BUSINESS		EXISTING BUSINESS	
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New Venture	√	Expansion of existing venture	√	Is the Company already in any of the following priority sectors? (Existing Companies Only)	√
Will the new company use ICT?		Does the Company use ICT?		Env. Technology or Env. Scheme	
Will the new company be e-commerce or internet based		Is the Company e-commerce or internet based?		Biotechnology	
Will the new Company be land-based or in Env. Sector		Is the company Land-based or in Env. Sector? E.g. a farm		Medical Equipment	
Will the new company have a woman director or partner?		Is there a woman director / partner?		Financial or professional services	
				ICT (core part of Business)	
				Tourism	
				Arts & Crafts	
				Media	

Has the business received grant aid from any other source in the last three years? YES / NO	Does the company employ less than 249 employees or have a turnover of less than £24 million? YES / NO
* N.B. IGNORE AGRICULTURAL SUBSIDY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PAYMENTS	
IF YES: From what source?.....	
How much?.....	
When?.....	

Business Project Officer

Date of first visit.....

Initial Evaluation	
Grant Potential	

FBAS / NWDA Planning Required? Y/N	Allocated Consultant?
FBAS / NWDA Planning Complete? Y/N	

Development Stages (If Applicable)	√
Planning Submitted?	
Planning Approved?	
Grant Submitted?	
Grant Approved?	

Source	Grant	Private
TOTAL		

Environmental Project Officer

Features of Interest (Ecologists notes)		
		Date:
		Ecologist:
		Joint Visit:

First Visit:		Env. Audit:	
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Existing Schemes				
Follow Up		Date Applied	Grant Amount	Notes
CSS	New		1 st Year Total	
	Renewal		1 st Year Total	
WGS / WIG			15 Year Total	
ELWOOD			Materials Value	
OTHER				