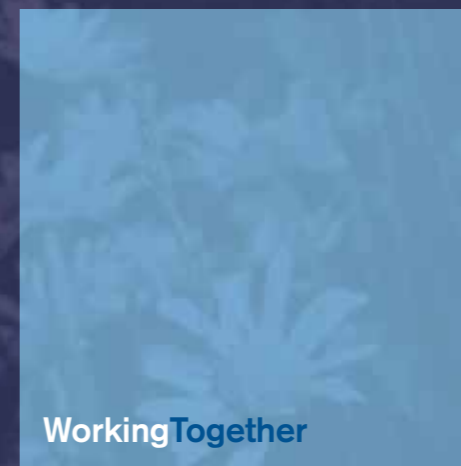




Delivering...

the future of England's rural economy



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Foreword

One of the main aims of England's Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) is to drive forward sustainable economic development in rural areas across the UK.



Food and farming make an important contribution to the national economy and are of strategic importance in rural England; together we are working to improve the sector's economic performance.

Sir Donald Curry's Commission on Sustainable Farming and Food has devised a long-term national strategy to develop the sector, the Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food (SSFF). This will be implemented on a national level through the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the new SSFF institutions. Its local and regional implementation is however, the responsibility of the RDAs and their partners in each English region. This work will be led jointly with Government Offices through regional delivery plans.

The strategy aims include the creation of a more integrated food and farming sector, which will forge stronger links between the food that is produced and what customers want to buy. It also covers the need to reduce the environmental impact of farming and encourage and support farmers in their role as stewards of the countryside.

The national strategy is delivered in tandem with other support that the RDAs are already giving or planning for the sector. Part of the RDAs' role is to listen to the needs of rural areas across the regions and develop locally relevant implementation programmes.

RDAs will also work with the Learning and Skills Councils and the Sector Skills Councils to raise the skills of those employed in the farming and food industries. We will also do more to support farmers in planning and managing their businesses, by working with and through Business Links' networks.

RDAs are also working to ameliorate the effects of Common Agricultural Policy reform and helping farmers to diversify their income and make better use of their assets.

Schemes such as redundant building grants have enabled farmers across the country to convert unused buildings to provide new office facilities, holiday cottages or other uses.

A major part of our role in the future therefore, will be to work alongside DEFRA and Government Offices for the regions to deliver projects that improve the prospects of our rural areas. Our ultimate aim is to bring long-lasting economic development to the countryside which we all enjoy and are proud of.

To this end, the RDAs have an on-going dialogue with the Government at both national and regional levels, aimed at driving up standards of delivery and improving our understanding of national, regional and local issues. The RDAs will continue to act collectively on SSFF and related issues led by the East of England Development Agency, of which I am chair.

Richard Ellis
Chairman
East of England Regional Development Agency



The RDAs and rural England

A vision we can all share.
A vision that will deliver greater prosperity for all.



In the last few years, the rural economy - indeed, the whole rural "way of life" - has been challenged to a degree that has arguably not been seen in over a hundred years.

The pressures have come from all directions... from fluctuations in worldwide commodity prices, health scares and animal diseases, environmental demands, shifts in buying patterns, closures of rural services... the list goes on.

The result is that many people living and working in the countryside have felt that their interests were being forgotten, that somehow the needs and demands of the urban communities were being put first.

The Government has shown its commitment to the countryside by commissioning several wide-ranging reports - by Sir Don Curry and Lord Haskins - that between them have not only identified inherent problems within the rural economy as it faces up to the challenges of the 21st Century, but have gone on to

In short, there is now a vision for rural England - one which we can all share. This vision does not lessen the role of the countryside, on the contrary, it sees rural England evolving dynamically, rising to the challenges it faces and seizing the opportunities to bring sustainable prosperity to the millions of people who live in our rural towns and villages.

provide a route map to enable the countryside to play its full role within the national economy.

Change will be necessary for this vision to be achieved. But this change will not be imposed.

It will spring from all the many stakeholders agreeing what is needed - and then setting out a delivery plan to achieve it.

It will be a plan that respects the natural environment and protects our natural resources. It will be transparent, customer-focused, regionally tailored and locally delivered. A role which England Regional Development Agencies can fulfil.

The RDAs are responsible for the sustainable development and regeneration of every part of their individual regional economies. They are ideally placed to drive programmes to generate new business opportunities for farmers; to encourage private and public sector organisations to work together on shared ventures that will

be to the benefit of all; to promote infrastructure investments that will enhance connectivity with the rest of the economy; and to set in motion projects that will ensure our villages and rural towns have a healthy, long-term, sustainable future.

But our view is that we will do this best by working together, not alone.

In the pages of this guide, you will see examples drawn from thousands of successful projects led or assisted by RDAs. They illustrate just some of the many ways in which RDAs serve England and work in close partnership with other agencies, organisations and companies - drawn from all sides of the public and private sectors - to deliver a vision for rural England.

A vision we can all share. A vision that will deliver greater prosperity for all.

Growing Businesses

Encouraging farm diversification and supporting business ventures in rural areas.

The role that farms and farmers play within the national economy is shifting radically, and with it, the entire rural business environment.

Downward pressure on commodity prices - and a recognition that land and buildings can be used to generate new, sustainable revenue streams - bringing out the natural entrepreneur in farmers and land owners.

Throughout England, farmers are moving away from traditional activities and diversifying into new ventures, such as specialised crops. Many are taking advantage of grant schemes that allow them to set aside land for nature conservation or to run activities that generate new revenue streams.

Thousands of buildings that have fallen into disuse due to the rationalisation of farming activities are finding a new lease of life. They are exploiting the trend for businesses to move away from city centres, forming the base for profitable new tourism and knowledge-based enterprises and providing new employment opportunities in rural areas.

The English RDAs are playing a full role in encouraging these trends, which - if managed properly - will open up a wealth of sustainable opportunities for the countryside.

The projects highlighted in this section are just a tiny sample of those now taking shape throughout the country.



Woodland Centre of Excellence



Writtle College

Case studies

Making wood earn its way

The South East region has the four most wooded counties in England: landscapes that are a great economic asset - attracting people to live and base their businesses in the region as well as attracting millions of visitors each year.

The South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) has made it a key objective to work with these business sectors and encourage their viability and competitiveness. As part of that commitment, it has created two new centres of excellence.

The Woodland Enterprise Centre at Flimwell in the Weald in East Sussex, the result of a partnership with the local County Council, local Agricultural College and private sector, has been supported by more than £1m.

The centre houses firms who use or are developing wood products, while the building itself demonstrates modern construction and design using local chestnut timbers, and is heated by a wood-fuelled boiler. The design was the winner of a Civic Trust award.

The second centre is based in the Chilterns in Buckinghamshire. Nearby High Wycombe is a major centre of furniture manufacturing. Originally famous for beech, the Chilterns now provides oak for the restoration of historic buildings and bespoke furniture makers.

SEEDA has committed £250,000 to set up an Enterprise Gateway here to support the furniture making industry - providing new business incubation and support for skills training, operated in partnership with Business Link.

Support for farm tourism

£2.68 million from the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA) is helping to benefit up to 2,000 farm tourism businesses in the region.

The four-year project is helping to develop and strengthen regional farm tourism regionally by assisting rural businesses with marketing and training. The sector also benefits farmers who have existing tourism businesses and wish to improve them, or those looking to diversify into tourism. New opportunities for other rural businesses, including craft workers, food producers, public houses and tearooms, are also being created.

Innovative projects to secure financial backing include a sculpture trail behind High Head Farm near Ivegill, Cumbria, where 30 sculptures and interactive panels will mark the route. A gallery, tea shop, and an educational resource centre for local schools will also be available.

Other farms to benefit include Hill Farm at Ings near Kendal, which has launched riding holidays for people who want to bring their own horses with them, and the owners of Croft House in Sowerby Row, near Carlisle, which aims to promote activity holidays.

Says Steve Heaton, the NWDA's Head of Rural Affairs: "The development of sustainable farm tourism is vital in helping to address the serious problems facing agriculture in the region."

"This project will help to create a significant and positive impact on rural communities and ensure a prosperous future for generations to come."

Developing future solutions by example

CERA - The Centre for Environment and Rural Affairs at Writtle College, Essex - has evolved rapidly since its formation in 2002. It plays a pivotal role in developing and trailing new ideas and technologies that can help rural businesses and communities throughout England.

The Centre links policy, theory and implementation in the fields of environmental technology, sustainable development and rural affairs - providing consultancy, technology transfer and applied research to the region and beyond.

To develop the work of the Centre, EEDA funded a feasibility study which has now led to the development of an environmental village based at the College - the catalyst and future home for a sustainable development business cluster.

The first stage of this development was opened in November 2003: a Rural Business Centre, also funded by EEDA. This building houses the CERA team and staff working on projects to conserve biodiversity and provide short business courses that support the rural economy of the East of England.

The team is working with partners to administer the Essex Rural Renaissance Fund for EEDA, while The Rural Business Centre building itself has been designed as a practical demonstration of sustainable building development. The net result is a building self-sufficient in energy.

The village will act as an exemplar site for social, economic and environmental regeneration projects - providing a new level of support to farming and rural businesses and the wider community.

Stimulating new businesses in rural areas

Budding rural entrepreneurs in North East England can find their ambitions matched with support through a novel concept called Enterprise Island.

The programme, run by the Robert Owen Foundation and supported by ONE NorthEast, involves a series of local competitions, which aim to find people keen to start a business.

The entrants do not need a business idea, or to of had any formal business training. A short interview with a panel gives the competitors chance to demonstrate their drive and determination. The prize is three weekends away in five star Slaley Hall hotel - "The Island" - where they are coached in developing their confidence and business ideas.

Malcolm Goodman, a recently-retired electronics engineer, has used the scheme to turn his lifetime hobby into a business. Malcolm has been flying kites since the 1970s and now owns a world class collection. Last year, he and his wife Jeanette moved into former B&B premises with a view to turning the ground floor into a kite museum.

Entering the Enterprise Island Challenge has given the Goodmans the confidence to fund the museum - using profits from the kites workshops and festivals business that, before the Challenge, they had been running on a very informal, "costs only" basis.

The rest of the family is also getting involved, setting up a line of kite gifts and souvenirs and running workshops. What was once a personal passion is now rapidly turning into a high-flying, family-run enterprise.

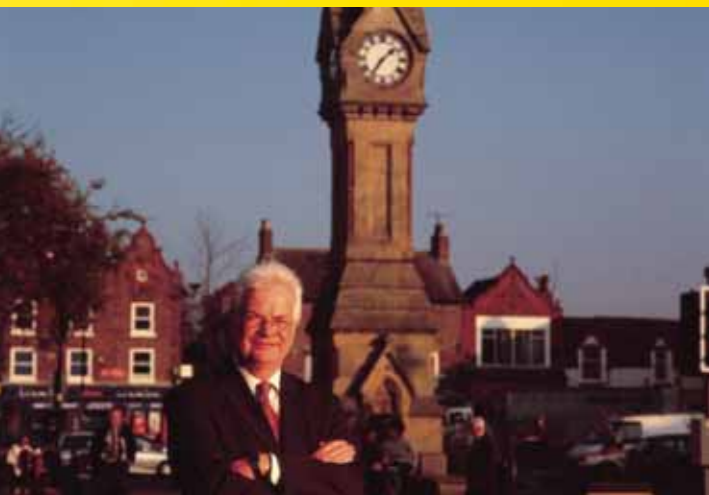
Strengthening Communities

Promoting initiatives to ensure a prosperous future for our villages and market towns communities.

Changing patterns in business investment and social infrastructure have put the economic and social viability of many of our villages and rural towns under serious threat.

Issues such as a lack of public transport and low cost housing, competition from out of town shopping centres, poor access to work and the closure of facilities such as shops, pubs and post offices can turn once-thriving and vibrant communities into dormitories and create pockets of deprivation.

For these communities to survive and thrive, enlightened planning and strategic investment will be critical. England's RDAs are playing a central role, regularly acting as the lead agency in cross-sector initiatives to achieve just that.



Lindsay Ross, Thirsk Regeneration Initiative

The future lies in facing the challenges - and seizing the very real opportunities that are available.

Investment is important, but developing well thought-through, joined-up solutions is even more vital.

The RDAs' unique ability to bring together fundings, as well as support from national, regional and local agencies is already securing a sustainable future for communities right across England.



Ray Edwards, EMDA, launching Mayfayres Day

Case studies

£7 million supports small rural towns in the South East

In April 2004 the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) launched a £7m programme to improve the economic well-being of small rural towns across the region.

SEEDA is not working alone, the new programme has been developed together with the regional South East Rural Towns Partnership and the Countryside Agency. Local authorities are also playing a significant role.

Many towns are now trying to find a new role and this initiative will be dedicated to exploiting their enormous, but often latent potential.

For example, rural towns provide significant opportunities for new business development and an opportunity to become an outlet for local produce. Rural, historic towns can offer affordable and key-worker housing as well as considerable potential for tourism.

SEEDA support for small rural towns is not new. Its Rural Development and Market Towns programmes have successfully committed £2.4 million to help improve more deprived towns in the region. The new programme will build on and extend those successes.

Renaissance and a future for Yorkshire's market towns

A pioneering project has begun in Yorkshire. Its ten year mission: to ensure that the region's "rural capitals" remain places where people want to live, work, visit and invest. Lessons learnt from the Market Towns Initiative, coupled with the experiences from the Urban Renaissance approach, have enabled the development of the Renaissance Market Towns programme (RMT).

The intention is to achieve a shift from a funding-driven to a strategy-led approach, coupled with a need to bring about a step change in aspirational thinking in market towns.

The Renaissance Market Towns programme, led by Yorkshire Forward, is working with a selection of small towns that have the potential to play a crucial role in the economic and social renaissance of the countryside.

For these towns to adapt to changing economic and social pressures and thrive in the 21st century, the role they play within the local community, together with the resources and facilities they offer, must match people's evolving needs and expectations.

So individual teams -consisting primarily of local people, but with expert advice and support from Yorkshire Forward - are themselves deciding their priorities. Each is developing an ambitious, but achievable, town vision and "charter", with accompanying prioritised delivery plan.

Communicating core messages

South West England has one of the largest rural populations in England, meaning that open communication is essential if all the voices of the rural community are to be heard.

The South West Chamber of Rural Enterprise (SW CORE) provides a single forum for representatives of rural businesses and organisations. They can co-ordinate efforts to strengthen the prosperity of the rural economy, secure the future of rural communities and ensure the continued protection of the outstanding environment of the South West.

Funded by the South West Regional Development Agency (SWRDA) and by members' subscriptions, SW CORE was established in November 2001. Members are drawn from all sides making this a truly representative organisation, and one whose views are listened to... and acted upon.

Membership incorporates an extremely wide cross-section of the rural economy, including agriculture, forestry, education, tourism, banking and accountancy, conservation and food and drink. Representatives of all the public bodies with an interest in the land-based sectors attend meetings of SW CORE as observers.

SW CORE not only aims to act as a forum for discussion, but also to provide an interface between the land-based industries and regional bodies such as SWRDA and the Government Office South West and to promote long term strategies for the development of the land-based industries in the region.

Market towns revive the maypole

Towns throughout the East Midlands remembered their heritage this May Day - as part of a major new initiative to secure a prosperous future.

Maypole dancing made up just a small part of the celebrations to mark the launch of the Market Towns Week initiative. The East Midlands Development Agency (EMDA) joined up with Action for Market Towns and the Countryside Agency to organise a series of events designed to celebrate the role our rural towns play as places to work, shop and socialise. They also put the media spotlight on just what market towns have to offer the rural economy.

15 market towns took part this year, each one organising a week-long variety of events. Many more are planning to get involved in next year's programme.

One town, Spalding, held the world's first 24-hour non-stop maypole dancing marathon.

Market Towns are enormously important to people living in the surrounding areas, these celebrations will not only bring the local communities together, but will also increase the numbers of visitors to see what the towns have to offer and help keep these areas thriving.

Improving Infrastructure

Initiating dynamic new projects to connect rural England with the rest of the economy.

Being “off the beaten track” may be one of the delights of living in the country, but it also limits people's access to products and services.

For individuals without cars, or access to cheap and reliable public transport, it can lead to limited access to well paid jobs, training and competitively-priced goods.

These are key issues for the English RDAs to address if the rural economy is not to lag behind its urban counterpart.

One area now recognised as critical for a full participation in the economic and social life, is access to high speed internet. Whereas all main conurbations now have access, connecting rural areas is relatively expensive and often technically complex.

The RDAs are therefore playing a joint role in bringing technologies such as wireless and satellite broadband to more remote areas.

The RDAs are also driving initiatives such as web-based “virtual” communities, which will enable businesses to exploit the opportunities of e-commerce and enable individuals - wherever they live - to train, learn, share and communicate.



Harwich Connexions

Case studies

Communities take transport initiative

Access to reliable and competitively priced public transport is a key issue for all rural areas. The Market Towns Initiative in Harwich, Essex established that there was a priority need for community transport to serve the town and surrounding rural area. Following discussions with potential partner organisations, a new Community Transport Initiative project for the area was set up - funded by the East of England Development Agency and other partners.

The plan was for a community transport service - to be managed by the community once an initial funding package was put together - Harwich Connexions Transport Co-operative Ltd was established to deliver the service. This became a not-for-profit social enterprise company and a membership co-operative open to all.

In March 2003 the service was launched by Alistair Darling MP, Secretary of State for Transport. The service has since successfully operated in Harwich town and surrounding rural areas since then. Additional vehicles have been acquired to address unmet demand and an assured funding package established for the second year of operation and planning for subsequent years.

Harwich Connexions Transport Co-operative now has 153 members, four employees and 17 volunteer drivers. It has carried 16,500 passengers during its first year of operation and now runs three 15-seat minibuses, one nine-seat minibus, one wheel-chair-accessible car and one community box van.

An additional minibus is run on behalf of social services and agreement has also been reached to operate an Adult Education Centre minibus.

Connecting food producers

The East Midlands - one of the UK's primary food production and processing regions - has found the perfect way to keep the industry interconnected and up to date. It's called foodcampus.com.

The East Midlands has thousands of businesses in the “food chain” - many in rural areas well away from the main conurbations. How better to keep the sector connected than through the internet, where distance is no object?

foodcampus.com acts as a central point of reference for individuals and organisations from all sides of the sector. It is a truly interactive site where relevant information is accessible at the touch of a button, where members can network and share ideas, business opportunities and knowledge.

The site, launched in 2003, is proving a huge success, with several thousand hits a month now being registered. Site contents include:

- A member producer showcase
- Industry profiles
- “Ask the expert” forum
- Events and training signposting
- Market and industry information

Sponsored by the East Midlands Regional Development Agency (EMDA), the website is playing a key role in keeping the food business connected and competitive.

Satellite option keeps rural businesses connected

Being based in the delightful Worcestershire village of Bishops Frome puts extra miles between Euroheat and their customers. But distance is no handicap to the company – or other local businesses - since the installation of an Aramiska satellite internet connection.

Euroheat - a manufacturer and distributor of domestic stoves, is located well away from conventional ADSL access via a BT exchange. Euroheat readily accepted an offer by their local Business Link to take part in a broadband trial - with the satellite installation fees paid for in return for a benefits analysis.

Their new supply provides always-on access at up to 1mb download and 250kbps upload speeds. Email correspondence with customers and suppliers is instant and the firm saves £1,000 a year alone in CD-based software updates.

Updates on their 4,900 page technical and sales website are now quick and simple. Faxing leads from the desktop to regional resellers eliminates the need to produce and post 13,000 letters a year.

This project has been supported through one of Advantage West Midlands package of rural broadband Initiatives. The Agency is working with public, voluntary and private sector partners across the region to improve access to and take-up of high-speed broadband internet access by rural businesses and communities.

Lincolnshire gets connected

Yorkshire Forward, in partnership with Business Link Humber, BT and other service providers has launched Broadband South Bank. This first phase of a multi-million pound investment will bring high-speed broadband internet technology to North and North East Lincolnshire, and drive down the cost to small businesses.

Businesses signing up for broadband connection could benefit from up to £300 towards a year's subscription from Yorkshire Forward.

Business Link Humber will work with businesses to help them realise the potential of high speed internet access which offers an “always on” connection at least 10 times faster than traditional modems at a fixed monthly rate.

39,000 homes and 4,000 businesses can benefit from the project and an additional £200,000 of European Funding will be used to inform and recruit potential broadband users from North and North East Lincolnshire. This will provide on-going training and support after installation and analyse the business benefits at the end of 12 months.

This project is an important part of an ambitious nationwide programme aimed at extending broadband to areas where, without this type of partnership working, it would not currently be economically viable.

Working Together

Stimulating wealth-creating partnerships, joint ventures and networking opportunities.

Delivering a sustainable future for the rural economy requires close collaborative working between all private, public and voluntary sector bodies that are able to contribute to economic prosperity.

Quite simply, no single organisation has the resources or capability to do this on their own. More to the point, any vision has to be shared - and owned - by every stakeholder if it is to have any chance of succeeding.



Scrumpy House Restaurant

The role of England's RDAs, in the wake of Sir Don Curry's Report and the subsequent Lord Haskins Report is to develop the strategies and partnership that will create a sustainable future for rural England.

The RDAs now act as a bridgehead - accessing and deploying local, regional, national and European resources. These examples of collaborative working illustrate the "joined-up" approach that is working to everyone's advantage.



Northwest Fantastic Foods Partnership

Case studies

Supporting a region's "Fantastic Foods"

Creating demand and establishing outlets for locally-produced specialities offers huge potential for England's food producers - at all stages of the food chain. Quality, premium foods can break through the problems of receding commodity prices and can stimulate tourism and sales for local retailers and farmers markets, helping to reinforce regional and local identities.

With these aims in mind, the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA) has invested £2.4 million into the Northwest Fantastic Foods Partnership, to highlight all aspects of the region's gastronomic delights, and showcase Northwest culinary expertise on a national scale. This is helping food businesses in the region to become more financially, socially and economically sustainable and competitive.

The Partnership has brought together all of the region's support agencies to create a co-ordinated service, providing a straightforward route to information, advice and support and playing a pivotal role in creating a brilliant future for a great regional tradition.

It will help promote the region's quality food producers nationally and encourage restaurants, hotels, shops and supermarkets in the Northwest to feature regional specialities - such as black pudding, Lancashire and Cheshire Cheeses and Cumberland sausages.

This project is an integral part of the regional delivery plan for the Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy, managed jointly by the NWDA and Government Office for the North West.

Farms are fuelling it for themselves

Few visions of the future are more self-sustaining than growing crops which are converted - locally - into environmentally-friendly vehicle fuel.

And that's the road that has been mapped out for North East England after Regional Development Agency One NorthEast formally opened the first pump selling bio-diesel in a planned network across the region.

The planned network will encourage more local drivers to switch to this fuel of the future. The region is already set to build the world's biggest bio-diesel production plant, starting later in 2004.

Rape seed grown locally will be one source of supply of the virgin oils that will produce 250,000 tonnes of bio-diesel a year.

North East Biofuels is the business-led group keen to make green fuel a real regional asset. With complete continuity throughout the unique supply chain partnership, NEB is determined to take the biofuels opportunity forward.

The end result: valuable new jobs in farming and processing, and a green fuel playing its part in reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Delivering a plan for the food and farming industry

An estimated 170,000 people work within the West Midlands food and drink industry which represents approximately 7% of the region's economy.

It's a large, complex and hugely differentiated industry - extending from "plough to plate". Each part depends on the other for its future, making collaborative working and a closer understanding of each other's needs absolutely vital.

At Advantage West Midlands, a huge amount of thought and planning has gone into refining the RDAs approach towards the food and farming industry in response to the Government's Strategy for Sustainable Farming & Food.

The result is a delivery plan which sets out a vision for the food and drink cluster involving all the other agencies and organisations that have an interest in the sector - at a national, regional and local level.

Projects to date include the establishment of a network of West Midlands "Rural Hubs", business to business groups which are helping to strengthen, modernise and diversify rural businesses base.

The agency is also seeking to develop businesses specialising in higher added-value food products, new and non-food crops, farming and the environment, rural and farm-based tourism and recreation, sustainable food procurement and healthy eating.

Celebrating local food in Bridport

Bridport in Dorset is in the middle of a hugely diverse farming and food production area - and now local people are working together to make the industry even more successful.

The South West Regional Development Agency, together with the Chalk and Cheese LEADER + Programme, Dorset County Council and West Dorset District Council, has funded West Dorset Food and Land Trust to establish the Bridport Centre for Local Food.

The Centre provides workspace for food-oriented micro-businesses and social enterprises as well as access to training and business support. Opened just a year ago, the Centre has now been recognised by the Countryside Agency as a national exemplar under its Beacon Towns Programme.

The building is equipped with commercial kitchens, ICT equipment, workshops and food distribution facilities - enabling producers and other food businesses to go there for business support and training, to network with other producers and to get help with funding.

Local people can learn about growing and cooking food, participate in voluntary activities and enjoy finding out about Bridport's food heritage. The Centre feeds into the rapid development of the local food industry and its many outlets including cafés, delicatessens and bakeries.

2004 is Bridport's "Year of Local Food" and the Centre is playing a key role in this by organising Bridport Local Food Week, a food directory and a website.

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