

# RURAL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND ADVANCEMENT GROUP

(INCORPORATING FRESH START AND FORGING FORWARD FASTER)



## *The background.*

Way back in 2005 the government of the day was responsible for setting up a programme they called 'Fresh Start'. Recognising that the farming industry was running short on new entrants, Fresh Start was structured to encourage the return of some of the people who had left the industry when it was going through bad times. Hadlow College opened the first 'Academy' - government word – that helped people to acquire new skills and update existing ones. The success of the Hadlow initiative can be judged by the fact that all those who graduated from the initial programme are currently working in the farming sector – and two are now running their own farms. Since those early days, the college has run three further 'academies' with similar beneficial outcomes.

## *Change of direction.*

There came a point when it became obvious that all those who wanted to 'get back' into farming had 'got back'. The thought then arose - why abandon such a good programme? Why not adapt it to benefit a much wider rural sector? Broadening the programme in this way would be beneficial for the rural economy. It could be adapted to benefit individuals, communities, businesses, charitable trusts, those offering professional services, in fact, virtually anybody involved - or seeking involvement - in any rural sector industry or an allied support service.

## *Advancing the brief and making it happen.*

With these thoughts in mind, the decision was made to form the ***Rural Business Development and Advancement Group***. The title embraces the group's focus and intentions to spread the benefits as widely as possible.

There is no age or academic barrier to membership. At the current time, the age range is 15 – 80-plus. Academically the range extends from those with very minimal or no qualifications through to several who hold doctorates or

equivalent professional qualifications. This spread is immensely valuable because it enables members to network, learn from one another and engage in ways that would not be possible were membership more restrictive.

The Rural Business Development Group opens opportunities for employers and job-seekers. It encourages the innovation and enterprise needed to start a business – and affords the help and advice needed to advance that business. It promotes diversification schemes. It helps to enhance the skills that benefit productivity and competitiveness so resulting in improved margins.

### ***Flexibility and forward-thinking – the vision for the future.***

The key to the already increasing success of RBDAG is the *flexibility* which enables it to be structured around members' current and emerging needs. A programme that is pedestrian or is devised to fulfil the needs of yesterday is a waste of time, effort and resources. Adaptability and forward-thinking are central to the vision of the group.

Twice monthly evening meetings are held and programmes, devised to fulfil members' needs, include visits to farms, horticultural establishments and diverse rural businesses. 'In house' meetings include presentations concerned with setting up a business, business plans, structures and procedures, health and safety regulations, insurance and finance.

### ***Current membership.***

The membership is currently approaching 100 and embraces representatives from widely diverse rural industries, a group of Young Farmers, members of Kent Smallholders, Produced in Kent and the NFU, Hadlow College HE students, the CPRE, et cetera.

### ***Attendance.***

Members are encouraged to be selective and, although some attend every meeting, others pick and choose. In the case of group visits, numbers necessarily have to be restricted and places are allocated in strict registration sequence. Attendance presently averages between 20 – 50.

### ***Programme.***

Although programmes are necessarily devised well in advance, everything possible is done to cover members' emerging needs in relation to specific visits/information/advice. In-house programmes include two presentations, the

shorter version designed to inform members about widely ranging rurally related bodies. So far, Produced in Kent, RAMSAK (Ring Agricultural Merchants Sussex and Kent), Kent Smallholders, CPRE (Campaign Protection Rural England), NFU (National Farmers' Union) and Why Farming Matters have been included. Future short presentations include Concordia, NFU Mutual, Kent Wildlife Trust, LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming), CLA (Country Landowners' Association),

Recent and forthcoming main presentations and visits include Mike Walters, HM Principal Inspector Health and Safety Executive. Visit to Broadwater Farm, West Malling, a large and very successful fruit farm - tour and presentation by manager Peter Checkley. Visit to Church Farm, Offham, large producer salad crops - presentation by owner Stephen Betts. Visit to the World Garden, Lullingstone Castle, a garden designed and opened as a tourist attraction as a means of recovering the family's fortune - tour and presentation by Tom Hart-Dyke who conceived and developed the idea. Visit to East Malling Research, one of the UK's most respected horticultural research establishments, tour and presentation by Dr Chris Atkinson and Dr Ursula Twomey. Presentation by Vincent Robinson, a beekeeper and member of the British Beekeeping Association. Presentation by Jan Lloyd, CEO of Covent Garden Market Authority. Presentation by Thanet Earth, a member of the Fresca Group.

Although the main presentation is necessarily booked months in advance, it is often possible to slot in a short presentation at the last minute. The programmes include an hour devoted to networking, something that is increasingly advantageous as the breadth of the membership increases. In addition, members can request advice and information at any time - and more and more are doing so! This service is maintained 7x7x24!

Because most members come to meetings straight from school, college or work, a buffet supper is provided.

A recent innovation is the presentation of 'Attendance Certificates' signed by the talk/tour presenter or other relevant person – the idea being that the certificates will be valuable when making job applications or applying for a place at college/university, et cetera.

Even more recently, 'presenters' are given a Rural Business Development and Advancement Certificate in the form of acknowledgement/appreciation.

*Now – and the future.*

The RBDAG is attracting new members from widely diverse rural sectors. The simplicity, effectiveness and inbuilt flexibility result in a blueprint that could be adapted throughout the country - and enquiries about the possibilities of setting up a similar group have been received from as far away as Devon. Enquiries suggesting some form of ‘associate membership’ have also been received and are being investigated.

Although membership is currently free and no charges whatsoever are applied, the intention is for the RBDAG to become self-financing by the end of 2015.