



Coast to Capital - Rural Roundtable

Thursday 23 May 2019: 10.30am – 12.30pm
Chanctonbury Room, South Downs Centre, North St, Midhurst, GU29 9DH

Meeting Summary

Attendees:

Tim Wates (TW) – Coast to Capital Chairman; Jonathan Sharrock (JS) – Coast to Capital; Kirsten Trussell (KT) – Coast to Capital; Deborah Urquhart (DU) – West Sussex County Council; Roger Paterson (RP) – Rural West Sussex Partnership; Trevor Beattie (TB) – South Downs National Park Authority; John Hall (JH) – Farming & Rural Issues Group SE; Simon Matthews (SM) – Rural West Sussex Partnership; Richard Hopkins (RH) – Fargro/West Sussex Growers; Tony Whitbread (TW) – Sussex Wildlife Trust; Matthew Woodcock (MW) – Forestry Commission; Matt Willcock (MW) – Defra; Tom Ormesher (TO) – National Farmers Union; Tamara Roberts (TR) – Ridgeview Wine Estate

1. Welcome, Introductions and Opening Remarks

TW, Coast to Capital Chairman, welcomed the group, thanked TB for providing the venue and set the scene for the roundtable.

2. Coast to Capital Local Industrial Strategy update

JS gave an update presentation on the Coast to Capital LIS, including the timelines, notably:

- 10th July - Coast to Capital Board meeting (A mandate for the LIS consultation is expected)
- 11th September – Coast to Capital AGM (Potential launch date for the LIS consultation)

JS presented the four proposed geographically-based products unique to the Coast to Capital area. These have been developed to allow people from outside our region to understand the different aspects of our economy. This includes the potential for the rural area.

JS answered questions regarding the presentation which is attached for reference.

3. Roundtable discussion

TW introduced the main discussion points and the group debated these in significant detail.

- To identify what is unique about our rural economy
- How to present our unique strengths to government, in response to the Industrial Strategy
- What investment is required to increase our rural productivity, that we should pitch to government

4. Summary and Next Steps

JS summarised the discussion.

The meeting had identified two aspects of our rural economy which could make it unique on a national level. Firstly that the quality of our environmental assets was extremely high. Combined with a relatively high level of wealth and income within the area, this gave us specific advantages as a place to lead a new type of rural economy based on natural capital. Secondly, that the innovation capital of the rural economy could be further improved: so that highly innovative micro-businesses had a better environment in which to grow. Developing the right innovation centres, modern fibre infrastructure, balanced communities and the right planning environment were all relevant here. At the same time, the meeting identified three industries which stand out as exceptional strategic opportunities within the rural economy.

a. Hi-tech horticulture

This is a £1 billion industry located mainly in the Bognor Regis and Chichester area due to the uniqueness of the high light levels. It is a growing expert hub of businesses which, due to the hi-tech nature of the business, requires high level skills and therefore pays high salaries.

Whilst an already hi-tech industry, the full introduction of robotics and automation is 10/15 years away if R&D and investment levels remain as they currently are.

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The group identified the following interventions which would quickly bring forward the introduction of automation and therefore increase growth and productivity in the industry within the Coast to Capital area:

- i. an increase in investment from Government to accelerate private sector investment in automation
- ii. investment in 5G
- iii. development of routes to market
- iv. an increased focus on research and development in academic institutions locally and nationally
- v. investment in the changing nature of skills needed for automation

b. Viticulture

Out of approximately 400 vineyards nationally, 200 of those can be found in the South East, with the bigger more commercial ones in Sussex. The unique ecology of the South East is well suited to this industry and as the climate changes is becoming increasingly more so.

The group identified the following interventions which would accelerate the growth of this industry:

- i. investment for long term stock financing
- ii. up front capital for brand development
- iii. an increased focus on research and development in academic institutions locally and nationally
- iv. investment in the changing nature of skills needed for automation

c. Tourism

Despite a wealth of high quality natural assets, the potential of the tourism industry in Coast to Capital and the wider South East of England and is undersold.

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The group identified the following interventions which would accelerate the growth of this industry:

- i. A coordinated region-wide approach, which might possibly be a South East Destination Management Organisation.

The meeting had also agreed that it is important to remain alert to potential funding opportunities, either in the current spending round (Local Growth Fund and European Structural Investment Fund) or through the proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

Closing remarks

TW thanked the group for such a stimulating discussion that showed true ambition for the Coast to Capital area and the surrounding South East region.

The conclusions of the group would be developed further in our work to prepare a Local Industrial Strategy. Further engagement and consultation would follow later in the year.