

## **Report from Sark Economic Workshops October 2013**

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This report is a short synopsis of the messages and observations from the economic workshops held in Sark, October 2013.

### **Workshops**

During the course of 10-12 October 2013 a series of workshops on the topic of economic development were held on Sark. The format of these workshops taken was to analyse the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in relation to Sark's economy (a 'SWOT' analysis). There were a total of five groups, each with about 25-30 participants. At the end of each workshop the groups were asked to pick the top three issues in each quadrant.

The charts produced, along with the priorities, are appended to this report.

### **Focus on Expertise**

It was agreed that tourism should remain as the dominant part of Sark's economy. There was some support for economic diversification into new sectors, but the main focus was on diversification within the tourism sector. This included promoting the green credentials of the island, encouraging the island to become more self-sufficient and trading off the sustainability of Sark (the '*good life*'). Other suggestions included the promotion of adventure holidays and activities, festivals and other events to attract new markets and extend the season.

The role of Chief Pleas was generally seen as an enabler to allow entrepreneurial ideas to be brought to fruition or help businesses overcome barriers to entry or growth.

### **Access to Advice**

There was a general point that no committee of Chief Pleas was mandated to look after the economy. Many businesses commented that they have access to advice from some friendly neighbouring organisations but in terms of getting access to general business advice many of the island's businesses felt isolated. There was some interest in how Chief Pleas might be able to assist businesses and help them get access to advice to ensure that business could continue to grow and become more efficient.

## **Infrastructure**

Infrastructure was common theme throughout the workshops with the focus on energy, in particular electric costs, being stifling for business and on the costs of living. In addition access to faster and more reliable broadband was seen as essential to create future business opportunities. It was commented that the on-island infrastructure was well primed for faster connectivity. Transport costs were also cited as something that negatively impacted the economy both in terms of visitor numbers and costs of exporting goods.

## **Access to Capital**

Many individuals commented that the uncertainty surrounding the proposals for land reform on Sark has created a lack of confidence. No one who attended the workshops was against land reform; it had a wide level of support, both to provide security in ownership of property and to assist in the raising of capital to fund new ventures.

## **Community Spirit**

So much of Sark's population seem to be economically active it was hard to distinguish the business community from the community in general. Many people spoke in concern that the community spirit was under threat and that the Sark was at risk of moving forwards in two contrasting directions. Many were also concerned that the island's reputation was at risk from negative press generated from within the island. In contrast some other residents argued that the critical press from within the islands was not of interest to potential visitors.

## **Data**

The importance of good quality data was raised in several of the workshops. It was agreed by many that Chief Pleas has a role to play in the collation and managing of that information and the community has a responsibility to contribute to the collation of data. This data will be essential to enable Chief Pleas, and its committees, to make evidence based decisions on policy.

## **Communications**

There was a lot of concern that the positive news about the island could be getting lost in the noise created by the bad publicity. It was noted that there is a lack of mechanism and capacity to communicate the positive messages about Sark and the work of Chief Pleas.

## **Public Engagement and Developing a Plan**

It was agreed in each of the workshops that Chief Pleas lacked an agreed vision and plan. An economic development plan would demonstrate to businesses the type of activity that would get Chief Pleas' support. This in turn would help the economy grow and develop in way that meets the vision for the future.

There was a wide level of appreciation for the opportunity to engage in the workshops and the benefit of them being run by an impartial facilitator. If the output from these sessions is worked into an economic development plan for Sark then there will be a role for further workshops and discussions. This will need to be ongoing as that plan is finalised, before it is presented to Chief Pleas and as it evolves over time.

Workshops such as these are good examples of effective public engagement in small communities. The level of participation across the workshop groups and the general island representation at these sessions was excellent. Establishing a policy for public engagement might encourage these sorts of events across the policy-making spectrum. This would further improve the decision making process of Chief Pleas and will benefit the community.

## **Summary**

The workshops have highlighted the need for Chief Pleas to further embrace its role in defining a vision and economic development plan. This will help Chief Pleas to encourage the creation of an environment that is conducive to economic growth. It is important for the community to engage in the process, embrace the island's economic plan and continue to work to bring forward new economic opportunities.

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