

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

South of Scotland Enterprise Bill

Public meeting – Galashiels, Borders Campus, 23 January 2019

Challenges

1. The Convener opened the session with a request for views on the economic and social challenges facing the region. All views expressed below are from attendees from the south of Scotland area.
2. Attendees highlighted the-migration of young people and an ageing and declining population as key challenges for the Scottish Borders area.
3. Transport and infrastructure are also problems. Young people find it difficult to get to college.
4. The Scottish Borders is recognised as area of high deprivation, young people find it very difficult to get jobs. There is a need to make the area attractive for young people to come back or for new people to come into the area.
5. There is a lack of identity of the area to encourage investment to come to the area to do business.
6. The south of Scotland does have islands, they just happen to be surrounded by land (*Explanatory note - this comment is referring to the difficulties normally associated with island life such as transport and infrastructure, and stating that the same problems exist in the Scottish Borders*).
7. Community councils in Scotland find it difficult to attract new members. No funding means that they are unable to deliver outcomes.

Opportunities

8. Losing young people is not unique to the area, but lots of them want to stay. However there need to be more opportunities for them to have careers and family life.
9. Landscape and natural heritage is an asset which will attract enterprise. A new National Park in the Borders could help support this. The role of park would be to encourage development. The area might be well placed to access subsidies which may in the future related to environmental stewardship.

10. One attendee expressed excitement in using food as a way of maximising potential of land for sustainable food production, that is small pockets of support to assist dispersed communities.
11. There is a need to recognise natural capital of land in the south of Scotland. A good example is the Borders Forest Trust – the land is not good for agriculture but you can grow trees, which demonstrates how the land can be more productive, and it can encourage visitors.

Need for enterprise agency

12. Previous enterprise support has been lost, advocacy for and promotion of the Borders is needed.
13. Support for social enterprise is limited. People become tied up in red tape quite quickly, and practical support is slow in coming. This means that people learn how to set up social enterprise themselves without support from national organisations. The agency needs to do more to support social enterprise.

What can the new agency do to add value?

14. Due to the ageing and declining population, the agency must have the ability to regenerate and advertise the area as a great place to do business, attract fresh talent, and be an enabler for new businesses to come in to the area.
15. One attendee said that there have been some success stories from Scottish Enterprise support, but the new agency should be on the Highland and islands Enterprise (HIE) model which would deliver improvements. Another attendee said that HIE is not the only model, and that we need to learn from bodies like Opportunity North East, an enabler for small and micro businesses. There was general agreement that there is a need to have a better model to encourage community engagement.
16. Scottish Enterprise and Business Gateway offered good help initially, but the new agency needs to encourage bigger employers to come which will then generate housing development. Attendees asked what funding and mechanisms will be in place to help attract investors and high quality professional jobs.
17. A social housing body representative called for development of construction and digital skills, and highlighted the importance of transport infrastructure, and saw the agency as a partnership which brings together economic and social interests.
18. It's important that there is a clear statement of ambition and resourcing for the new agency, rather than just create a new agency.

19. The agency support shouldn't be limited to traditional industries – need to look also at sustainable and high-tech businesses and industry.
20. The new agency should have imagination, flair, be fleet of foot, have an element of managed risk, have an ability to be flexible and a co-ordinator.
21. There is a need to recognise the importance of creative industries. Social and community enterprise can also enrich small towns (an example was given of a brass band), there is an opportunity for synergy of such groups with the new agency. Social and community enterprise needs to be a specific focus for the new agency.
22. One attendee highlighted the importance of considering the data requirements, recognising the importance of mapping economic trends, etc. The new agency also needs to encourage value added of products going south – how do we do more to sell/use these in Scotland?
23. There must be clarity of the respective roles of new agency and Scottish Enterprise – what are the respective responsibilities and balance of funding? There is also a need to ensure co-ordination between other initiatives such as City Deal, etc.
24. The environment must be given the same status as economic and social objectives of the new agency, the environment needs to be protected and not despoiled for short term jobs. The new agency should be the catalyst for enabling changes in land management.
25. The new agency should be more democratic, local people should be involved. There is a problem of local people not coming forward for agencies, which is not helped by a lack of proper advertising. We need to encourage people grounded in local area with proven level of success in their area of experience and expertise.
26. Work to develop small communities is often done by small number of people making a huge personal commitment – this should not be underestimated. Communities need the agency to be energetic and committed to change.

Specific views on the Bill

27. Concerns were expressed that Scottish Enterprise in recent years has gone for national flagship projects, but areas of dispersed communities like Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders need an 'acorn to oak tree' approach. Communities need seed corn funding to be provided to support small new businesses, rather than focus on small number of large businesses.

28. It's importance that agencies work in cooperation and coordination rather than in silos, both public and private (timber transport being an example), everyone involved needs to work from the same script.
29. Accountability – it's really important that there is an opportunity to make the agency report back to local people.
30. For the agency, we should not be scared of appointments by Ministers as this could result in high quality appointments.
31. There should be a means in the Bill to encourage local involvement like community councils or a Community Board.