RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

SOUTH OF SCOTLAND ENTERPRISE BILL

SUBMISSION FROM THE SOUTHERN UPLANDS PARTNERSHIP

We would like to make the following comments on the proposed bill to establish the South of Scotland Enterprise Agency.

Overall we strongly support the establishment of the new Agency. However, we are concerned that the draft bill makes minimal reference to the need to value and respect the environment which is vital to many current and potential enterprises. There is some emphasis on the need to “capitalise” on natural and cultural assets, and there is a danger that this emphasis could result in the depletion of these assets.

The word “sustainable” is much over-used in general without a true intention to adhere to what it actually means, but we note it is not used once in the draft bill and suggest that this does not reflect the consultation responses which favoured an agency focussed on a properly sustainable approach to business, society and the environment.

The term “amenity” in relation the environment also has urban connotations and suggests that the environment is there to be used rather than nurtured. We suggest a phrase such as: "conserve and enhance the environment of the South of Scotland” would be more appropriate to include.

We welcome the two principle aims at 5.1. While the Bill sets out an interpretation of the first of the aims at 5.2 it does not do so for the second of these which is to "improve the amenity and environment of the South of Scotland." It would be helpful to see some further interpretation of how this is to be achieved so that the Board is clear what it is meant to do. We suggest the following:

- Support efforts to improve recreational provision that attracts visitors to the South of Scotland
- Support initiatives that sustain and enhance Biodiversity and landscapes as a contribution to making the South Scotland an attractive place to invest.

We very much welcome the inclusion of the social remit but we note that para.5(2). sets out six actions in expansion of the first aim related to economic and social development. Five of these (a-e) relate to economic development and only one (f) relates to social development and this is rather narrow relating to “supporting community organisations to help meet their communities’ needs.” We suggest that this is too narrow an aspiration. For example, communities in the HIE region have been actively encouraged to take-on local renewable energy schemes. This goes further than addressing a need - it actively encourages the development of enterprise, and we believe this proactive approach to community enterprise will be vital in the South. Support with taking ownership of assets and addressing more strategic issues such as tourism and access also offer significant opportunities for new social enterprise.

We also suggest that greater cross reference could be included to relate the role of the new Agency with other Government ambitions and targets, such as those relating to addressing
fuel poverty, shortage of affordable rural housing, generation of renewable energy, mitigating for climate change, ambitions for community land ownership and delivery of ecosystem services such as biodiversity, carbon-sequestration and flood mitigation. All these could form the basis of new social or private enterprise and all will impact to some degree on the success of other local enterprises.

We are especially keen to see links made to the Governments’ development of the Land Use Strategy. The Borders LUS Pilot showed how map-based information could be used to guide land-use decisions to deliver maximum public benefit. In a future where public support for rural development will be stretched, this facility would be of significant value and we would hope that further steps could be taken by the Agency to use such an approach to target future support.

Overall, we believe that the new agency needs to have a clear focus on the land based sector because farming and forestry are going to change as a result of whatever comes out of the Brexit process. These sectors have assets that are crucial to the future realisation of many of the new agency’s objectives. These sectors will need to diversify and the agency should be able to play a key role in assisting such development so that it brings maximum benefit to the region.

We note that the list of legislation to which the bill relates fails to acknowledge the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009.

The Southern Uplands Partnership was very pleased to be asked to assist with the SoSEP consultation process and we would be delighted to play an ongoing role in this regard. If the new agency decides to establish a forum for considering how to support communities to realise their social and environmental objectives (as per sect 9), SUP would be a willing contributor.

I trust these comments are of some value and we look forward to seeing the final version of the Bill in due course.