

Youthful ideas for rural regeneration

To stem the exodus of young people from rural Friesland, students at Van Hall Larenstein researched what young Frisians want for their area, and helped them think through business plans.

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Young people in Friesland, the wind-swept northern province of the Netherlands known for its distinct language and culture, would like more frequent bus services, better travel information and on-board wifi. Their wishes were taken into consideration when the regional bus services were tendered last year and a wifi pilot is now being run. All thanks to a project called Young Frisians on the Move. The project came about in 2008 when Wim Timmermans, lecturer in Green Urban Environment at Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences (VHL), part of Wageningen UR, and Khoji Wesselius of the provincial bureau for rural projects in northwest Friesland put their heads together. In the north-western corner of Friesland, the population is shrinking due to aging and outmigration by young people. ‘We wanted to tackle this depopulation’, says Wesselius. ‘So we were interested in the views of young people in the northern reaches of Friesland, in their dreams, ideas and future plans. But our usual approach didn’t work. The language of older people didn’t mean anything to the youth.’ So ‘Young Frisians on the Move’ took a different tack. In the first phase of the project in 2009 and 2010, students at VHL and NHL universities of applied sciences in Leeuwarden spoke to about 450 young people, approaching them on the street, at school or in canteens.

PROUD FRISIANS

These discussions led to the drawing up of a young people’s agenda with ten points for attention in the areas of housing, work,

education, mobility, security and leisure. Municipal councils, the provincial council and civil society organizations then set to work on these issues. A conference was held at which the young people’s wishes were shared with politicians, civil servants and people from the business world: they ranged from street lights on dark country lanes to affordable housing and university Master’s programmes in Leeuwarden. Frisian youth are ‘proud’ of their province, the agenda declares. One of the ways they would like to express this is through lucrative tourist activities that create jobs. VHL students following a minor course on Development Planning helped them think through the possibilities. They came up with ideas for transforming abandoned villages into, for instance, a paintball village or a horror village where you could camp for a weekend with friends. They also dreamt up a Tsjerke Tour – a tour of churches where artists exhibit their work and local products are sold.

WAGON RIDES

In the project’s second phase in 2011, VHL students once again set to work to draw up business plans for boosting the leisure economy in Northern Friesland, including events and tourism. With a view to young people’s wish for university education in Leeuwarden, one of them took the first steps towards planning a student rowing festival along the route of the legendary Eleven Towns skating race. Johan de Braak, second year student of Forest and Nature Management, applied himself to making a plan for tours of the area. ‘I lived in

Drachten for five years myself. You see some of the outlying villages there getting emptier and emptier too. People are leaving because they cannot find any work. Starting up a business can be a solution in such cases’, he says.

Gerda Dam of the Sandy Road Ranch is enthusiastic about the students’ ideas. Her riding school is near Esonstad holiday park. She wants to offer guests a ride in a wagon pulled by a tractor running on biodiesel or solar power. ‘There are certainly things I can make use of in Johan’s plan’, responds Dam. ‘Like the idea of getting a local to give a talk about the area during the ride and providing earphones with a translation in French and English.’

EYE-OPENER

‘Some very good plans have come out of it’, says Khoji Wesselius, who commissioned the plans. ‘All in all, ‘Young Frisians on the Move’ has stirred things up a bit.’ Even after the last session in January 2012, the project’s impact continues to be felt. Young people and students are still delivering input, for example for the development of the University Campus of Friesland and of tourist activities. ‘It was innovative to look at the decline from the point of view of young people, and to approach young people through students who speak their language’, says Wesselius. VHL lecturer Wim Timmermans agrees. ‘For many government officials and civil servants it was an eye-opener to realize that young people had something to say about this. You cannot do anything about an aging population but you can try to keep young people in an area.’ ■