

**ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**RURAL AREA WORKING PARTY**

**Minutes of a meeting held on Thursday 21 January 2010 at 5.00 pm  
in Room GFR14, West Suffolk House, Western Way, Bury St Edmunds**

PRESENT: Councillor J Thorndyke (Chairman)  
Councillors Mrs Bone, Mrs Broughton, Chappell, Mrs Levack, Ray,  
Redhead, Spicer, Stevens and Mrs Whittaker

**12. Substitutions**

No substitutions were declared.

**13. Apologies for Absence**

No apologies for absence were received.

**14. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 November 2009 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**15. Declarations of Interests**

Members' declarations of interests are recorded under the item to which the declaration relates.

**16. Work Programme**

The Working Party received and noted Report A469 (previously circulated) which contained its current Work Programme.

Clarification was sought on the Working Party's role as a consultee in relation to the Delivery of the Local Development Framework in the Rural Area, which was a new item in the Work Programme. Advice was given that consultation had now concluded on submissions to the Council for potential development sites in rural settlements. The next stage of the Local Development Framework was to identify Preferred Options for the allocation of sites for development in rural areas. The Core Strategy identified Key Service Centres and Local Service Centres and these were considered suitable, subject to environmental and infrastructure capacity, for additional growth over the next 20 or so years. Officers had appraised each Key Service Centre and Local Service Centre for their ability to take development and the suitability of sites proposed to the Council to meet policy requirements. Additionally officers had assessed other sites that may not have been suggested to the Council but which may be suitable in terms of scale, location and environmental potential impact. Consultation on the Preferred Sites was scheduled to commence in April 2010 for 6 weeks. The Rural Area Working Party would be asked to comment at its meeting on 15 April 2010 on the Preferred Options.

There were no other matters Members wished to raise on the remainder of the Work Programme.

*(Councillor Mrs Whittaker arrived at the meeting during the discussion of this item.)*

## **17. Parish Council Conference - Update**

The Working Party considered Report A470 (previously circulated) which asked Members to note the way in which the Parish Council Conference had developed and to agree the continued planning of and preparation for the next Conference on 29 April 2010.

A list of partner organisations invited to attend was attached as Appendix A to the Report and Members suggested that Havebury Housing Partnership be added to this. The draft agenda for the Conference was attached as Appendix B.

The aims of the Parish Council Conference were to:-

- (i) encourage networking between Councillors, officers and partnership organisations; and
- (ii) raise awareness of current rural issues and facilitate, wherever possible, programmes to inform and assist rural communities in improving sustainability and developing strategies to deal with issues.

Evaluation forms were distributed at each conference and a review of effectiveness was carried out using the collated feedback. This helped to identify agenda items or future topics for discussion and to provide an opportunity to consider the future format of the Conference. For example, a change was made following feedback that too much use was being made of presentations and that delegates would welcome more time to network and have more in-depth discussions. As a result the refreshment break, which was previously moved to the middle of the conference to facilitate networking, was extended, the number of presentations limited and half the agenda devoted to workshop sessions. The networking nature of the conference also allowed delegates to review how other Parish Councils were addressing rural issues.

As part of the review process officers identified agenda items for the next conference. The provisional agenda was then approved by the Leader of the Council, Chief Executive and Management Team. Now that the Working Party existed draft agendas would also be submitted to Members for comment.

The Working Party noted the way in which the Parish Council Conference had developed and commented as follows:-

- (i) it was requested that Members representing rural wards be given advance notice of the draft agenda and a breakdown of parishes represented at the last conference to enable these Councillors to give further publicity to the event. It was noted that details of forthcoming Parish Council Conferences was also given in the Council's publication 'Rural News';
- (ii) after the next conference further consultation be carried out with Parish Councils to obtain a consensus view on the preferred time for future Conferences to commence; and
- (iii) Rural Funding be included as an item for discussion on appropriate future Conference agendas.

RESOLVED:-

That the continued planning and preparation for the next Conference on 29 April 2010 be agreed but in view of its proximity to a possible General Election these arrangements be kept under review.

## **18. Business Rates and the Revaluation – the effect on our Rural Community: Presentation**

The Working Party was given a presentation by the Deputy Revenues and Benefits Manager which outlined changes affecting Non-Domestic (Business) Ratepayers.

A revaluation of business premises had been carried out by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) and this would come into effect from 1 April 2010. The revaluation had resulted in a 20% increase on Rateable Values (RVs) nationally and a 20.93% increase for the rural area of St Edmundsbury. Details of revised RV assessments for individual properties could be viewed on the Valuation Office website. For the purpose of calculating Business Rates a multiplier, of the RV, was used and this was fixed nationally by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). For the current financial year the multiplier had decreased from 48.5 to 41.4.

To ameliorate the effects of the revaluation a scheme of Transitional Rate Relief would operate for the first five years whereby caps on the amount of any increase or decrease would be applied.

Also operative from 1 April 2010 was an amended Mandatory Scheme of Rural Rate Relief. This applied to Rural Settlements with a population of less than 3,000 on an appointed date. A full list of Rural Settlements within St Edmundsbury had been included on the Council's website. Automatic relief of 50% was applied to qualifying businesses, which were, either the sole general store, post office, petrol filling station or public house in a Rural Settlement. Certain categories of food store also qualified. Additionally there was a scheme of discretionary relief for businesses not qualifying for mandatory help but which were of benefit to the local community.

Various other forms of relief also existed i.e. Small Business Relief, Discretionary 'Top Up' Relief (applying to village halls etc), Hardship Relief and Section 44a Relief.

The Working Party thanked the officer for her presentation. Members concluded that as the Council had no control over the increases in Business Rates a press release should be issued making the situation clear that the Council was the collection authority and it only had discretion over Business Rates payable in so far as some forms of rate relief were awarded.

## **19. St Edmundsbury Rural Youth Work Programme**

The Working Party received and noted Report A471 (previously circulated) which provided information about the Rural Youth Work Programme and outlined future events and activities.

The range of activities which formed part of the Annual Programme made significant contribution to the Council's corporate priorities, in particular around improving the wellbeing of the community. The Working Party was invited to make comments and suggestions on how the future programme of activities could be improved and to provide feedback about the activities during the past year.

The 2009 Rural Youth Work Programme had engaged with 1,038 young people and had included the following projects:-

- (i) the Kedington Street Art Project;
- (ii) the 'Go with the Flow' Youth Bus;
- (iii) Clare Youth Club Bike Maintenance Sessions;
- (iv) Free Transport for central activities;
- (v) CB9 Media Hub VJ Tour; and
- (vi) the 'Wos Up' Project weekly event in the parishes of Barrow, Barningham, Ixworth, Kedington, Stanton and Wickhambrook.

Officers advised that although there were aspects of the Programme which could be improved, overall the participation rates and feedback from young people suggested it had been very successful. It was hoped to develop the Programme during 2010 by building on the learning and partnership working from the last two years. Some of the areas to be worked on were to:-

- (a) continue to fund the 'Wos Up' Mobile Provision and to increase the number of evenings it operated from two to three;
- (b) ensure that the recording of statistics was based on the number of different young people attending the 'Wos Up' Project, as well as keeping overall attendance figures;
- (c) continue to work with and consult with young people and develop other activities in the rural areas of St Edmundsbury;
- (d) continue to work with partners to develop innovative rural projects;
- (e) aim to develop better partnership working by keeping in contact with relevant local organisations, for example Parish Councils, the Safer Neighbourhood Team and local existing youth organisations or clubs in the villages where the projects took place; and
- (f) review which villages and locations projects would work best in.

The Working Party viewed a video showing participants giving their feedback on the Kedington Project.

Members commented as follows:-

- (1) a finding of the Place Survey was that there was a priority need for facilities for young people and this reinforced the work being done;
- (2) local communities should be encouraged to carry out 'self help' schemes and in this regard sources of funding be made known and ward members should offer support;
- (3) there were difficulties in encouraging youth provision at the local level with young people not always articulating what form of events they wanted. There may also be resistance to youth facilities being established near some residential properties; and
- (4) there were problems with transport for young people wishing to attend project venues from neighbouring villages. This was a matter where perhaps voluntary transport/car sharing could provide solutions. The officers also asked Ward

Members to let them know where problems existed so that they could look at targeting activities in new locations.

In a response to a question, officers advised that a review of the existing arrangements for engaging young people in St Edmundsbury was being carried out.

## **20. Economic Action Plan**

The Working Party considered Report A472 (previously circulated) which sought Members' views on extracts of the Economic Assessment and draft Economic Action Plan relating to the Rural Area of St Edmundsbury. These were attached as Appendices A and B respectively.

On 18 November 2009 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had endorsed a draft Economic Assessment and on 13 January 2010 the Policy Development Committee had approved a draft Economic Action Plan which put forward proposals for what the Council could do to promote the economic prosperity of St Edmundsbury. Currently, both documents were the subject of consultation until the end of February 2010. It was proposed that the final Economic Assessment and Action Plan would be submitted to the Policy Development Committee and Cabinet for approval in March 2010 in readiness for the actions to be implemented from the start of the financial year 2010/2011.

In producing the Economic Assessment and Action Plan, Government guidance had been followed which advised that assessments should be strongly place based. The Assessment and Action Plan therefore had different sections for the Borough as a whole, for the two towns and the rural area. In drawing up the proposals for the Action Plan, care had been taken to ensure that they included any proposals of economic relevance in existing Council documents, so that all the Council's policy documents were complementary and compatible. Many of the proposals in the Economic Action Plan were familiar from other policy documents, particularly the Rural Action Plan.

Subsequent to consideration of the Economic Action Plan by the Working Party, Members having individual comments were asked to pass these to officers by 1 March 2010.

The Working Party in relation to employment in the rural area of St Edmundsbury suggested that agriculture was still a major employer although this was not indicated in the section of the Economic Assessment on Structure of the Local Economy. Similarly the cumulative total of persons employed in equestrian businesses warranted re-examination. There was difficulty in obtaining figures regarding employment in agriculture but it was suggested that the National Farmers' Union or Larking Gowen, Accountants be contacted in this regard. It was also suggested that the strategic distribution of petrol filling stations was an issue requiring examination since a number of these facilities in villages had closed and residents in rural areas were now faced with travelling long distances to obtain fuel supplies. In relation to Broadband difficulties, Members were advised of a campaign, Eastern Region Broadband Uplift Scheme (ERBUS), which was active in seeking improvements. There was, however, a need for statistics to back up the case for improving Broadband reception in the whole of the Borough.

RESOLVED:-

That the following comments be taken into consideration in the formulation of the Economic Assessment and Action Plan:-

- (i) in the section on Structure of the Local Economy the inclusion of references to employment in agriculture and equestrianism;
- (ii) the strategic distribution of petrol filling stations and ways in which these might be improved; and
- (iii) the case for Broadband improvements being substantiated.

*(Councillor Spicer left the meeting during the discussion of this item.)*

## **21. Review of Rural Area Funding**

The Working Party considered Report A473 (previously circulated) which sought:-

- (i) agreement for a Member Sub-Group to be established to conduct a review of rural funding; and
- (ii) identification of the purpose of the review and the broad issues to be included within it.

On 12 November 2009, the Working Party noted its Terms of Reference and agreed its Work Programme. A review of the Council's current funding arrangements for rural areas had been included in the Work Programme. It had been agreed that, in particular, this should examine the range of grant support for rural organisations and projects and revenue and capital spending targeted specifically at rural areas. As a consequence of the review Cabinet would be advised of any new Sustainable Funding Strategy for Rural Areas during Autumn 2010 in time for 2011 budget setting.

The report suggested that it would be beneficial if an informal Sub-Group of the Rural Area Working Party be established to conduct a detailed evaluation of rural funding prior to options being developed. This Sub-Group would undertake the detailed work of the review, with officer support led by the Policy Performance and Customer Service Manager. The Sub-Group would be likely to need to meet on 2 to 4 occasions and would report to the Working Party at regular intervals.

It was proposed that the following funding sources were included in the review, although this was not an exhaustive list and additional areas of funding and/or income opportunities might be identified:-

- (a) Parish Council Revenue Support Grant;
- (b) Capital and Revenue Grants distributed by the Council, for instance for village halls;
- (c) Rate Relief;
- (d) funding of the Rural Action Plan; and

- (e) opportunities to increase access to funding either from other agencies or via collaboration with partners.

RESOLVED:-

That Councillors Mrs Broughton, Chappell, Redhead and Thorndyke be appointed to the Rural Funding Sub-Group and carry out the review as outlined in Report A473.

## **22. BT Public Payphone Removal: Consultation 2009**

The Working Party received and noted Report A462 (previously circulated) which advised that on 20 January 2010 the Cabinet, following consultation, had objected to the removal of 30 payphones out of 53 proposed by British Telecom (BT). The full list of telephones the subject of the BT proposal was attached as Appendix A to the report.

## **23. Dates of Future Meetings**

The Working Party confirmed the following dates for future meetings:-

2010:

15 April;  
17 June;  
30 September; and  
18 November.

2011:

13 January;  
10 March and  
12 May.

All dates were Thursdays and meetings would commence at 5.00 pm.

The meeting concluded at 6.55 pm.

**J THORNDYKE  
CHAIRMAN**