

ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

RURAL AREA WORKING PARTY

**Minutes of a meeting held on Thursday 15 April 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, Clifton-Brown
(substituting for Stevens), Houlder (substituting for Ray),
Mrs Levack, Redhead and Spicer

24. Substitutions

The following substitutions were declared:-

Councillor Clifton-Brown for Councillor Stevens; and
Councillor Houlder for Councillor Ray.

25. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ray, Stevens and Mrs Whittaker.

26. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 January 2010 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

27. Declarations of Interests

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

28. Delivery of the Local Development Framework (LDF) in the Rural Area and the LDF Rural Housing Allocations

Officers gave a presentation on progress towards the adoption of the LDF with particular reference to allocation of sites for future development in the Rural Area of the Borough.

The LDF Core Strategy document set out the strategy for development across the Borough up to 2031 and identified 6 Key Service Areas, 12 Local Service Centres, Infill Villages and the Countryside as the Settlement Classification Policy for the Rural Area. The distribution of growth in the Rural Area was envisaged as being 18% and this equated to 2,811 new dwellings potentially concentrated in the Key and Local Service Centres, although it was estimated that 575 of these might be on 'windfall' sites throughout the Rural Area. The Core Strategy document had reached the stage when it would be subjected to Public Examination conducted by an independent Planning Inspector and this process would commence on 26 April 2010.

The Rural Allocations Preferred Options Document formed part of the LDF and set out detailed proposals for development in the Rural Area. These consisted of some sites put forward by landowners/developers, which had previously been the subject of public consultations, and others which had not come forward in this way but which were considered by the Council as being suitable for possible development. Following

assessment by officers, taking into account comments from consultees and environmental and infrastructure considerations, the sites in the Rural Allocations Document were being put forward as the preferred options for development. The document was now the subject of consultation. The sites identified for housing and employment gave an indication of capacity and requirements but with constraints also being identified. Some minor changes to housing settlement boundaries were also being proposed so as to bring these up to date. Notations of proposed amenity areas on settlement plans had been removed but a blanket policy, intended to safeguard such areas, was to be maintained. Methods of consultation were also outlined by officers.

The Working Party noted that it would be asked to consider the responses to the public consultation on the Rural Allocations Document in due course. Members asked that they be circulated via the Members' Bulletin with information on the status of the various documents which were now making up the Local Development Framework and also that they be supplied with a copy of the letter sent to Parish Councils in connection with the Rural Allocations Consultation.

(Councillor Spicer arrived during the discussion of this item.)

29. Affordable Housing in the Rural Areas: Rural Housing Needs Surveys

The Working Party considered Report A624 (previously circulated) which provided an overview of the delivery of affordable housing in rural communities in a national and local context, and outlined progress, with examples, on the delivery of affordable houses in the Rural Area of the Borough.

As part of its current Work Programme the Working Party had been asked by Cabinet to examine rural housing need and delivery issues and to seek to attract additional external funding.

Section 8 of the Report focussed on the provision of affordable housing through rural exception sites via partnerships between Parish Councils, the Borough Council and Housing Associations with grant aid from the Homes and Community Agency. An essential prerequisite for such a scheme was that it was based on an established local housing need which was ascertained by a housing needs survey initiated by the Parish Council assisted by the Rural Housing Enabler of Suffolk ACRE (Action for Communities in Rural England). Louis Wilby, the Rural Housing Enabler, had been invited to the meeting but she had been unable to attend.

Appendix A of the Report provided information on the situation on the completion of housing needs surveys by parish in the Rural Area of the Borough. This indicated that progress with the Key/Local Service Centres had been good with surveys having been carried out in the majority of these villages. The surveys had showed a need for further 72 affordable homes. However in 'infill villages' there had been only 2 surveys completed during the last 3 years out of a total of 26 parishes. There were difficulties in providing resources to enable this work to be progressed on a systematic basis, dependent as it was on voluntary support from Parish Councils and in view of the situation that the Rural Housing Enabler of Suffolk ACRE was also required to cover other rural parts of the county.

On 2 December 2009 the Cabinet had signed up to the National Housing Federation's 'Save Our Villages Campaign' which asked local authorities to commit themselves to carrying out housing needs assessments and develop action plans to ensure that such needs were being identified and met.

The Working Party noted the partial progress in completing housing needs surveys for rural parishes in the Borough and acknowledged that the lack of additional

resources was inhibiting a more systematic approach being adopted. It was of the view that whilst the completion of up to date surveys for all parishes was highly desirable a proposal for more resources would be subject to constraints imposed on the Council's finances.

RECOMMENDED:-

That the Cabinet consider whether there are means within available resources towards adopting a more systematic approach to providing rural housing needs surveys on a three yearly cycle as part of the budget and service planning process for 2011/2012, including investigating sources of external funding for this work.

30. St Edmundsbury Domestic Energy Efficiency and Affordable Warmth Programme

The Working Party received and noted Report A625 (previously circulated) which provided a background to the Council's work to improve domestic energy efficiency and secure an affordable level of warmth in residents' homes.

The Council was committed to improving domestic energy efficiency and achieving affordable warmth in homes across the Borough in accordance with its recently revised Affordable Warmth Strategy (formerly the Fuel Poverty Strategy). The Affordable Warmth Action Plan 2009/2011 was attached as Appendix A to the Report.

Officers gave a presentation on projects which had been undertaken in connection with this Strategy and on future activity proposed with particular reference to rural communities.

The House Condition Survey 2008 had identified that approximately 20% of homes in the Rural Area of the Borough were in fuel poverty. A number of factors contributed towards this situation:- a higher proportion of properties were of solid wall construction, there was no availability of mains gas supplies in the majority of parishes, there were lower than average incomes and a higher number of dwellings which were privately rented.

A Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) was applied to calculate domestic energy efficiency on a scale of 1 to 100. The target SAP rating for all properties was 65 and any assessment below 35 was indicative that housing was difficult and expensive to heat. The average score for the Rural Area was 46.

A Regional Government backed project 'Heatseekers' had been in operation in parts of the Borough during last Winter and this had been able, with the aid of thermal imaging equipment, to identify those properties which suffered heat loss to a greater extent and were in need of further survey work to ascertain whether they would benefit from cavity wall or loft insulation. Commencing this Summer owners would be written to and visited subsequently if they were interested in having such improvements made. Discussions were in progress with another company who were looking to undertake a 'door knocking' campaign in the Borough which was aimed at increasing insulation measures, promoting renewable energy and increasing benefit take up. This proposal along with the use of different service providers was under investigation.

Heatseekers had been provided with a list of 18,000 properties and during last Winter they had surveyed 10,000 of these. With both forms of survey being progressed there was an aspiration that over the next 5 years the whole of the private housing stock in the Borough would be assessed for energy efficiency.

The Working Party was supportive of the proposal but stressed that a full publicity campaign should be embarked upon in advance of any programme of visits taking place. This publicity should include written notification to owners/occupiers of properties to be visited and general advice in Community Spirit and notification to Parish Councils and other appropriate bodies of the work being carried out.

31. Place Survey: Overview of Rural Responses

The Working Party received and noted Report A626 (previously circulated) which outlined the findings of the Place Survey 2009 with a focus on the Rural Area of the Borough.

All local authorities were required to carry out the Place Survey which had replaced the former Best Value User Satisfaction Survey. The purpose of the survey was to measure what local people felt about the quality of life in their community. It asked residents about their views of St Edmundsbury as a place to live and how satisfied they were with local public services. This helped the Council to measure how effective it was at making a difference to individuals and to the community as a whole. The survey also enabled Councils to collate 18 National Indicators (NIs).

On 29 September 2008 questionnaires had been distributed across the Borough and the deadline for returned questionnaires had been 5 January 2009. All Councils were required to achieve a minimum of 1,100 responses. To achieve the required response, 4,000 questionnaires were distributed to a random selection of households across the Borough (addresses provided by the Audit Commission). By the end of the survey period, 1,625 had been returned completed, with 30 returned as failed mail, yielding a response rate of 41%.

Whilst data had been submitted to the Government by the required deadline at the end of January 2009, final statistics and guidance had not been released by the Government until October 2009. Analysis of the results had, therefore, been delayed.

Whilst the Place Survey was anonymous, responses were referenced so that they could be allocated to individual wards. It was, therefore, possible to analyse responses by dividing the Borough into three areas: Bury St Edmunds, Haverhill and the Rural Area.

The findings of the Place Survey in relation to the overall Borough had been previously reported (minute 41 of the Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee of 25 January 2010 referred).

The Report gave a breakdown by Rural Ward of the factors considered to be most important in making somewhere a good place to live. In the majority of rural wards this was indicated as being the level of crime. Respondents were also asked to indicate which areas needed improvement and the replies received for rural wards were: road and pavement repairs, activities for teenagers and public transport. These responses were broadly the same as for urban areas of the Borough.

In so far as the Rural Area of St Edmundsbury was concerned:-

- (i) residents living in the rural area were more satisfied in general than those living Bury St Edmunds and Haverhill and there was a much stronger feeling of belonging to their neighbourhood;
- (ii) in relation to services run by the Borough Council, such as refuse collection, rural residents were very satisfied (higher than the national average). However, there were a number of areas where satisfaction in the rural wards remained below national average; and
- (iii) in the vast majority of rural wards, people considered that 'level of crime' was most important in terms of making somewhere a good place to live. With this in mind, it was reassuring to note that people's views about feeling safe remained high.

Members in discussing the findings expressed views that a high level of crime was sometimes a perception as it was not borne out by actual incidents of crime and that Anti-Social Behaviour was often caused by adults and should not therefore be generally associated with teenagers. Difficulties with public transport provision was acknowledged but these were not helped by regular changes to timetables made by bus operators.

32. Work Programme 2010

The Working Party received and noted Report A627 (previously circulated) which contained its current Work Programme and an update on the Rural Action Plan. On the Work Programme it was reported that there would be a presentation at the meeting on 17 September 2010 by Steve Cook on the 'Village Hub' concept ie. the more effective use of village halls and playing fields. In relation to item (x) of the Rural Action Plan, Community Transport, it was reported that proposed transport route being developed by Suffolk County Council should have referred to the south of Bury St Edmunds and not the west of the A143 as stated.

33. Dates of Future Meetings

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

2010:

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 6.58 pm.

CHAIRMAN