

ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

RURAL AREA WORKING PARTY

**Minutes of a meeting held on Thursday 30 September 2010 at 5.00 pm
in Room GFR14, West Suffolk House, Western Way, Bury St Edmunds**

PRESENT: Councillor J Thorndyke (Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Bone, Chappell, Houlder (substituting for Mrs Broughton), Mrs Levack, Ray, Redhead and Stevens.

12. Substitution

The following substitution was declared:-

Councillor Houlder for Councillor Mrs Broughton.

13. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs Broughton, Spicer and Mrs D Whittaker.

14. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2010 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Further to Minute 8, Parish Conference Planning, the Working Party was advised that parishes had not yet been advised of the date of the Spring Conference but this would be publicised in the invitation for the Autumn Conference, if this had not already been sent out, or at the Autumn Conference itself.

15. Declarations of Interests

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

16. Introduction to the 'Village Hub' Concept

Steve Cook, former Chief Executive of the Havebury Housing Partnership, gave a presentation on the 'Village Hub' Concept.

This initiative advocated the establishment of a community partnership which through the use of existing assets, such as the village hall and playing field, enabled income streams to be generated and thus allowed local services to be sustained or developed.

A copy of a document 'Village Hall to Village Hub' was tabled. This outlined issues involved in putting the concept into effect and, also provided examples of successful projects achieved. A fictitious example was also outlined in this publication. The scenario depicted was of a village which had lost many of its basic services but having the potential to dispose of a small area from its playing field to provide for the development of two small business/workshop units and a range of housing. Linked to this proposal was the refurbishment of the village hall and the provision of a community shop and a computer based community information point/internet access scheme within these premises. Funding of the community elements of the project were envisaged as

coming from rents and capital raised from an element of the housing to be provided being for sale on the open market.

Mr Cook advised that there was support in the form of loans and legal advice for Village Hub projects from Foundation East and he undertook to provide Members with further information about the work of this organisation.

The Working Party discussed the idea of the Village Hub Concept and was of the view that it was unlikely to have relevance in both smaller and larger parishes. It was acknowledged that there might be scope in other, mid-range, villages where there were infill opportunities and community held land was underused. In the light of the situation that grant sources for village projects were diminishing, the Village Hub Concept might provide an alternative whereby such schemes could come to fruition. There were issues to be overcome, eg. the disposal of recreational land for alternative use(s) would conflict with planning policy and this was a matter which would warrant investigation.

RESOLVED:-

A further report be presented on the Village Hub Concept to the meeting scheduled for 18 November 2010 which would:-

- (i) identify those villages where the initiative might be applied and in this regard Members were asked to advise officers of parishes in their wards which they felt were appropriate for consideration; and
- (ii) examine in more detail the issues which would have to be confronted if the idea is to be utilised by individual parishes.

17. Participation of Rural Communities in the Future Stages of the Delivery of the Local Government Framework

Officers advised that the Independent Inspector's Report on the Local Development Framework (LDF) Core Strategy had now been received. This had found that subject to various minor amendments being made the document was sound. The next stage was for the Council to consider formally adopting the document in its amended form.

Members were already aware that the Government had abolished Regional Spatial Strategies and was now placing a new emphasis on 'localism' to be incorporated in the Development Plan process. This change envisaged that, where considered necessary, distinctive local policies would be introduced into development plans. These would have the objective of making the area 'sustainable, attractive and good to live in'.

Officers advised that a new national planning policy framework would be published within the next year to 18 months. Amendments to current Planning Policy Guidance documents (PPG's) were also anticipated. Until such time as this new guidance was available local planning authorities who had not yet adopted their LDF were advised to do so as an interim arrangement. In the absence of an adopted LDF Councils would doubtless come under pressure from developers.

In the context of development in rural areas, the Working Party had already considered the Rural Area Allocations – Preferred Options document of the LDF. This document was, however, site related being based on proposals put forward by developers and landowners and in certain cases the Council itself. There had been no wider consideration of parishes as whole entities. Officers suggested that with the change of emphasis there were opportunities to work with parishes on wider issues. This might include the formulation of Parish Plans and consideration could be given the integration of the Rural Action Plan within the Council's planning policies (LDF). This work would involve an active role for the Working Party. Members discussed this potential for participation by parishes in the planning process along with the other issues, such as the proposed capping of parish precepts following local referenda and parish councils becoming responsible for decisions on minor development control applications.

RESOLVED:- That

- (1) officers work with parish councils/meetings to identify issues and understand concerns at the local level and to develop Parish Plans but it be recognised that there will be staff resource implications involved;
- (2) consideration be given to the integration of proposals contained in the Rural Action Plan with the Council's planning policies but it be acknowledged this may only be achieved in the fullness of time; and
- (3) the Rural Area Working Party be involved in the work outlined above and reports on progress be made in due course.

18. Targeting of campaigns to promote the take up of Benefits in Rural Areas

Officers gave a presentation on the current take up of Benefits with particular reference to rural areas where it was felt that there was a higher percentage of failure to claim entitlement to Benefits.

The current caseload for Benefits was 7,968 and the total cost of benefits for 2009/2010 was £23 million for Housing Benefit and £6 million for Council Tax Benefit. The current economic downturn, changes in eligibility rules in so far as certain forms of income were discounted, and the recent increase in employment opportunities following the opening of large retail outlets in Bury St Edmunds had all been factors affecting take up.

Regular forms of publicity on the availability of Benefits were leaflets and information included with Council Tax bills. An article had also been included in the Winter edition of 'Community Spirit'. Various other means had also been considered such as 'flyers' in Post Offices, local press adverts, Benefit road shows, and information points at local events, eg. Nowton Fair, but invariably there was a cost involved in giving more extensive publicity.

Concern was expressed that the application form involved extended to 24 pages. Officers explained that the content of the form was prescribed by regulations. Full information about applicants' circumstances had to be obtained to prevent fraudulent claims. The form had been designed to be as simple as possible and to incorporate Plain English guidance on how to complete it. Officers also were available, if required, to help claimants with the application process. A suggestion that the use of the word 'Rebate' instead of 'Benefit' would remove some of the stigma associated with claiming

was supported. It was recognised that upon becoming eligible claimants should contact the Council as early as possible to avoid arrears being accumulated. The information contained in the presentation was noted.

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

19. Review of Rural Area Funding: Final Report

(Councillors Mrs Bone and Stevens declared personal interests as the Council's representatives on the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Advisory Committee and remained within the meeting.)

The Working Party considered Report B235 (previously circulated) which outlined the findings of the sub-group appointed to review rural area funding and sought approval of the sub-group's recommendations on future funding.

On 21 January 2010, the Working Party had discussed and agreed the membership of a sub-group to look at the Council's funding arrangements for rural areas. The aim of the sub-group was to provide Cabinet with recommendations for a sustainable funding strategy for the rural areas with a view to advising on a new strategy in time for 2011/2012 budget setting. Councillors Sarah Broughton, David Chappell, Derek Redhead, and Jim Thorndyke were Members of the sub-group.

The Working Party was asked to note that this review had been commissioned and would be substantively completed prior to the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010 when large cuts were expected. The deliverability of any proposals to Cabinet relating to grants and funding streams, rural or otherwise, had therefore to be seen in this wider context.

The sub-group had looked in particular at:-

- (i) the range of grant support for rural organisations and projects; and
- (ii) revenue and capital spending targeted specifically at rural areas.

It did not examine the delivery of services in rural areas and considered how the Council provided targeted financial support to rural communities alongside the services it provided itself.

The sub-group had discussed the aims and objectives of each of the funding streams detailed in Appendix A to the report in order to identify the benefit of such funding to the Council and its communities and had made the following recommendations:-

- (i) **Grants to Parish Councils** (*£157,500 for 2010/2011*): This scheme had been reviewed in 2009/2010 and as a result was already subject to a reduction and a cap in 2010/2011 and 2011/2012. The sub-group did not therefore believe that a further reduction was necessary.
- (ii) **Village Halls, Play and Recreation Areas** (*£62,457.58 for 2010/2011*): The sub-group considered that this was a worthwhile funding stream which supported a range of projects. Funding should therefore be retained.
- (iii) **Rural Area Community Initiatives Fund (RACIF)** (*£43,340 to end of 2011*): The sub-group believed that this was a useful fund as it provided a mechanism for groups to apply for smaller sums of money. Furthermore, the match-funding requirements and quick decision making process made it an attractive fund for

communities. The sub-group wished to see this funding stream retained after 2011.

- (iv) **Rural Action Plan Fund** (*£100,000 for 2008-2011*): The sub-group believed that this provided a useful funding scheme for revenue and capital projects and would like this retained after 2011.
- (v) **Suffolk Rural Economy Scheme** (*£5,000 for 2010/2011*): This scheme drew in additional match funding to the area. As such, the sub-group considered that the scheme provided value for money and the Council's support should be retained.
- (vi) **Rural Rate Relief Scheme**: The sub-group believed that this scheme provided a range of support to businesses in the rural areas and should therefore be retained.
- (vii) **In Bloom funding** (*£4,000 for 2010/2011*): The sub-group believed that this stream should be removed with the funding being added to the RACIF scheme.
- (viii) **Christmas Lights** (*£3,000 in 2009/2010*): The sub-group agreed that this money should no longer be provided as a separate fund and that the money should be transferred to the RACIF fund with communities bidding as part of this scheme.
- (ix) **Brecks Partnership and Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Projects** (*a total of £26,910 for both in 2010/2011*): It was noted that funding has been agreed for the Brecks Partnership over three years, and Dedham Vale Project over two years. The sub-group questioned the value of supporting both these projects and felt that it was not clear what was the benefit to St Edmundsbury. It was noted that the Council was required to give 12 months notice of its intention to withdraw from either agreement. The sub-group recommended that Cabinet review both funding streams.

The sub-group also considered the following alternative funding streams:-

- (i) **Rural Locality Budgets**: Using the current funding streams available, as outlined in Appendix A to the report, the sub-group had modelled the likely level of funding which might be available through 'locality budgets'. The sub-group looked at the current funding streams provided on an annual basis and divided the total by the 18 rural wards. Based on the assumption that, at best, there would be no increase in the amount of money available, the sub-group agreed that a rural locality budget would not be suitable as the level of funding which could potentially be provided was too small, particularly to support capital projects. It was agreed that the current system should be retained whereby Councillors supported communities to access funding.
- (ii) **European Union (EU) funding**: The sub-group considered the EU funding streams that are applicable in the rural areas. It was noted that Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) was available for non-public sector organisations in the Brecks area and several businesses had accessed this funding. It was felt that sufficient opportunities were available to access EU funding. Further information on EU funding opportunities was contained in Appendix B.

- (iii) **Support for Parish Council Elections in 2011:** The Council had previously offered a subsidy for contested election costs, detailed in Appendix C, and a decision was needed by the Autumn. Parishes were aware of the potential withdrawal of the funding, although this was not likely to be a widespread issue in the rural area; the main decision was in fact whether to meet the costs of the two town councils, as these elections were usually all contested and the most expensive to run due to the numbers of electors involved. The sub-group therefore felt that, as a Borough-wide issue which impacted mainly on towns, this was outside of its main remit and was a matter for Cabinet to determine as part of budget-setting for 2011/2012.

These recommendations were discussed by the Working Party. Some concern was expressed about any withdrawal of funding from the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Project in view of the agreement with partner organisations to maintain contributions. Members were advised that no conclusion about the future funding of this Project and that for the Brecks Partnership had been reached and hence it had been recommended that Cabinet carry out separate detailed reviews of these projects. The Working Party accepted this situation and endorsed the sub-group's remaining recommendations.



RECOMMENDED:- That

- (1) *subject to the clarification outlined in paragraphs 3.2 (vii) and (viii) of Report B235, ie. funding for In Bloom and Christmas lights being included in the Rural Area Community Initiatives Fund (RACIF), all current rural funding streams be retained;*
- (2) *the Rural Action Plan and the Rural Area Community Initiatives Fund funding streams due to end in 2011 continue;*
- (3) *no new rural funding streams should be introduced;*
- (4) *funding for the Brecks Partnership and Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Project should be examined in more detail as part of the budget setting process for 2011/2012; and*
- (5) *the level of subsidy for Parish and Town Council elections be reviewed by Cabinet as part of budget-setting for 2011/2012 and a decision be notified to parishes in time for precepting.*

20. The Council's approach to the new neighbourhoods agenda in the rural area

The Working Party received and noted a narrative which recalled that a Neighbourhood Development Section had been formed as part of a modest reshaping of the organisation in September 2009. The section brought together the line management of the West Suffolk Local Strategic Partnership Manager, the Electoral Services Unit and the functions of the Community Development Unit, which included grants advice, community safety, youth and health improvement work as well as support to local communities and groups. Following the creation of the new section it was thought appropriate to report to the Working Party how its support can be accessed for local communities.

Over many years rural communities had demonstrated their self-sufficiency in setting up groups, accessing funding and campaigning for local services and facilities which was what neighbourhood development was about. In this respect many rural communities have a long history of putting the 'Big Society' into practice. However, there were some occasions when rural areas which have specific issues, or groups and communities want support for a particular activity. For some of these issues the Economic Development Officer who focused on rural issues would call on Neighbourhood Development staff for their assistance. For example, in providing model constitutions for community groups, advice on the options for setting up a bank account for a local group or technical support around establishing a working Parish Meeting. Staff from the section also supported some of the projects in the current Rural Action Plan, and looked forward to working with the Economic Development Officer on future plans.

The Working Party noted that Neighbourhood Development staff were there as a resource to be accessed. However, to keep the overview of rural activity with the Economic Development Officer it was helpful for requests to come through her where they were for one-off assistance rather than part of on-going pieces of work.

21. Work Programme 2010

The Working Party received and noted Report B236 (previously circulated) which contained its current Work Programme.

In relation to the item on Parish Conference Planning a copy of the provisional programme for the Conference on Monday 22 November 2010 at 4.00 pm at Hawstead Village Hall was tabled.

Members suggested that greater emphasis be placed on Parish Councils themselves to become more involved in running future conferences. It was also felt that Clerks should be requested to ensure that the bi-monthly Rural News magazine was forwarded to Parish Councillors.

22. Dates of Future Meetings

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

18 November 2010;
13 January 2011; and
10 March 2011.

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

The previously approved date of 12 May 2011 was deleted in view of the proximity of this date to Borough and Parish Council elections.

The meeting concluded at 7.18 pm.

**J THORNDYKE
CHAIRMAN**