

ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

RURAL AREA WORKING PARTY

**Minutes of a meeting held on Thursday 24 January 2013 at 5.00 pm
in Room GFR14, West Suffolk House, Western Way, Bury St Edmunds**

PRESENT: Councillor J Thorndyke (Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Broughton, Clifton-Brown, Hale, Pugh,
Ray, Redhead, Mrs Rushen and Stevens

BY INVITATION: Councillor Griffiths, Leader of the Council,
Councillor Mrs Gower, Portfolio Holder for Housing,
Licensing & Environmental Health,
Councillors Clements, Mrs Mildmay-White and Spicer.

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 3 September 2012 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to, in minute 9, the deletion of the word 'to' in the penultimate sentence of the first paragraph.

15. Declarations of Interests

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

16. Rural Profiling Project

Officers recalled that the background to this proposal was that in April 2010 the Working Party had recommended that a more systematic approach be adopted, within available resources, to providing rural housing needs surveys on a three yearly cycle as part of the budget and service planning process for 2011/2012. Cabinet had subsequently approved an annual sum of £10,000 for this work.

On 14 March 2012 the Working Party had considered Report C394 which sought approval of a draft brief for a Rural Profiling Project and an associated pilot scheme. The report referred to recent developments which would influence the delivery of affordable housing, and included:

- (a) the Localism Act 2011, which meant that decisions about housing were to be taken locally;
- (b) changes in the way new affordable housing was to be funded introduced by the Homes and Community Agency (HCA); and

- (c) the introduction by Suffolk County Council of a 'Flexicare' Policy aimed at keeping people independent and living in their home as long as possible.

The report also drew attention to the need to review how local housing needs surveys were carried out. It, therefore, proposed that a pilot project be developed which would involve a different approach, whereby survey work sought to provide broader information regarding the village to help shape future housing supply and ensure appropriate support services were developed too. In discussing the report, the Working Party felt that there was some overemphasis on involvement with, and provision for, older people and the terms of reference for the pilot project should be broader based so as to include all sections of the community. It was accepted that work on any Neighbourhood Plans being developed by Parish Councils would be dovetailed with work on the pilot project. On 28 March 2012 Cabinet accepted the draft project brief, subject to an amendment, and agreed that the allocated sum of £10,000 be utilized for implementing the Pilot Scheme. A suggestion that Ixworth and surrounding villages be selected for the pilot project had been supported. Officers reported that since that time only limited progress had been achieved in setting up the pilot scheme, although Ixworth Parish Council had indicated its willingness to participate.

At the invitation of the Working Party, Stephen Hill, Director of C20 Future Planners, gave a presentation on community based initiatives and the solutions adopted to achieve local aspirations. He outlined the policy context which allowed such initiatives to come to fruition. The Localism Act had allowed Neighbourhood Plans to be formulated and introduced the Community Right to Build. Health and Well Being Boards had been set up separately and these had the ability to be more proactive in matters of Health and Care Services provision. He suggested that as settlements were constantly changing Councillors had a role in leading the debate on how local services were provided. There were issues to be addressed on how Planners and Service Designers worked together and how publicly held capital could be used as leverage. Community led initiatives from around the UK were illustrated which related to e.g. schemes for affordable housing, energy efficiency, community pubs/meeting places and food production. With regard to affordable homes, reference was made to co-housing schemes with guaranteed affordability in perpetuity and also the importance of obtaining customer perspectives e.g. via the Housing Learning and Improvements Network. Overall such initiatives could provide improvements to social life, mental and physical health, access to food and fuel, fitness and mobility, cultural life and employment opportunities. Finally Mr Hill outlined the procedural steps involved in assessing and analysing need and resources available and then establishing changes in approaches on how the services could be provided.

Members gave their responses to the issues raised by the presentation. Similar successes achieved in St Edmundsbury were outlined along with difficulties experienced in other cases which had effectively blocked initiatives. Reference was made to parish data already available to the Borough Council which had been obtained with funding from the Prince's Foundation Enquiry by Design Scheme and Village Plans/Surveys produced by individual parishes with assistance from Suffolk ACRE. The deficiency of affordable homes provided in the rural area was felt to be a particular issue. It was felt that for a community initiative to gain momentum there had to be a nucleus of active and motivated people involved. It was suggested that, in order to promote the opportunities for community initiatives, Mr Hill be

invited to address a Parish Conference or, alternatively, a representative of a group from elsewhere which had successfully carried out a community project be asked to speak at this event.

The Working Party discussed what next steps should be taken. Officers advised that there was a sufficiency of data provided from previous surveys from which specific villages could be identified for possible inclusion in the Pilot Project.

RESOLVED:

That a report be submitted to the Working Party meeting on 13 March 2013 identifying a list of villages in the categories of large, medium and small which are appropriate for inclusion in the Pilot Project along with costings for carrying out the work involved and, in the meantime, those villages identified be the subject of informal approaches by officers to establish if they are willing to participate.

17. Evidencing Rural Need

The Working Party considered Report D257 (previously circulated) which proposed changes to the current method of evidencing housing need in rural areas to support development of rural exception schemes. The changes were closely linked to the Rural Profiling Project.

Traditionally, in order to evidence housing need, a housing needs survey of the parish had been carried out. Once the need had been established a Registered Provider, i.e. Housing Association, had been selected to take the development forward. This was then followed by work to identify a suitable site. The scheme was then dependent on the Registered Provider financing the scheme with additional funding support from the Homes and Communities Agency.

The way affordable housing was funded had changed. The Government had allowed Registered Providers to charge rents of up to 80% market rent so that they could borrow more private finance, and as a consequence the level of financial support had been reduced by approximately £40,000 per home. Registered Providers were contracted with the Homes and Communities Agency to deliver an agreed number of homes by March 2015. There was no certainty of funding beyond then and further reductions in grant levels were being planned for. In order to maximise the number of affordable homes built in the Borough, the Council had to assist Registered Providers to move quickly to deliver homes before 2015, where possible, but also had to be cautious about raising expectations of delivery in villages after then, until future direction was more certain. It would be important for the Council to work with its partners to review how affordable housing was funded in rural areas in future and this would be the subject of a separate report to the Working Party.

The current process of carrying out a housing needs survey was initiated usually by the Parish Council and could typically take 6 months to complete. The time taken from survey results to bringing forward a planning application could mean that the data was too old to provide meaningful evidence. The data received back was only an indication of housing need in so far as all households were invited to complete the survey but return rates were typically between 30% and 40%. A further drawback with a survey was

that whilst it identified housing need it did not show best solutions, e.g. it might be better to provide smaller homes for people to downsize into rather than build more family homes.

The Borough Council working with in partnership with the Cambridge Housing Sub-Region jointly funded a Strategic Housing Market Assessment. This followed Government guidance on assessing housing need and was accepted by planning authorities and developers as robust evidence of housing need. The Market Assessment had the additional benefit of having a rolling programme of updates. The limitation was that the data was at a Borough level.

The Housing Register provided further more localised evidence. From this officers could identify the number of applicants who had indicated particular villages as their preference as well as their housing need. The demand for properties could also be reviewed by showing the number of bids per property type. Data from the Housing Register could be reported on quickly and could also be further refined by working with the County Council to look at specific needs, e.g. the impact of an ageing population. Presently, the Housing Register gave insufficient information regarding local connection but this was being addressed.

It was possible, therefore, from both the Strategic Housing Market Assessment and the Housing Register to evidence both the need for affordable housing and the likely property types required in any locality. The advantage of using this data was that it is a quick process and could be updated as and when necessary.



RECOMMENDED:-

That the Borough Council stops carrying out housing needs surveys and evidences future housing schemes in the following way:

- (i) carry out Borough-wide assessment of rural housing, focusing on key service centres, service centres and infill villages; this assessment to be undertaken using the Strategic Housing Market Assessment, Housing Register and other data with an objective of completing this work within 3 months and updating annually thereafter;***
- (ii) this assessment would allow the Borough Council to map localities showing the greatest housing need, thus providing a strategic overview which can then be used to determine future development priorities and allow the Council to be responsive to future opportunities, and be of particular use once the situation regarding funding post-March 2015 becomes clearer;***

- (iii) the assessment to provide a mandate to engage with Parish Councils and work with local communities to shape solutions and then link in with the draft Rural Vision 2031 and the work currently being developed around the Rural Profiling Project; and**
- (iv) in the event of approaches by individual parishes who are concerned about housing need in their locality, based on the information from the assessment, the Council would be in a better position to advise accordingly and work with them on potential solutions.**

(At this point the Chairman varied the order of the agenda to enable an officer not in attendance who would be presenting the report on item 19 to be called to the meeting)

18. Draft Rural Area Working Party Work Programme 2013

The Working Party considered a narrative which listed ideas submitted by members for topics for discussion to be included in the Working Party's Work Programme for 2013.

In relation to the suggested item of underachievement in rural schools Officers advised that an examination of this issue had been carried out by Forest Heath District Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committee and that a Working Group of the Borough Council's counterpart committee would be considering the information obtained but applied to St Edmundsbury. A member suggested that renewable energy options should be an integral part of the item proposed for Landscape Quality Assessments. The Working Party were of the view that it should focus on items where value can be added by the Borough Council and that consequently any effect it could have on Rural Transport issues and Schools' Reorganisation was likely to be limited. The list of items was agreed but it was suggested that members have a further opportunity to contribute further topics by contacting officers in time for the next meeting.

19. Rural Youth Work Programme

The Working Party considered Report D258 (previously circulated) which provided an update about the various activities, events and projects which had been delivered for young people over the past year and which formed part of the Borough Council's Rural Youth Work Programme. The report sought approval, subject to budgetary provision in 2013/2014, of an option in respect of the broad form of Rural Youth Work provision for 2013/2014.

During 2012 projects had been as follows:

- (i) 'On the Spot' Youth Van

This came into service in Haverhill in 2010 after receiving considerable external funding. The project currently operated up to two nights a week in Haverhill and provided a weekly session in Kedington. Opportunities for taking the project out to Hundon and Clare were being explored; and

(ii) 'Wos Up' Project

'Wos Up' was a detached mobile provision in rural areas. In 2012, following the procurement process, IPSUM YP was commissioned to deliver this project and it had operated in the following villages: Barrow, Stanton, Wickhambrook, Hundon, Kedington, Barningham, Ixworth, Gt Wheltenham and Hopton. An amendment of the report containing revised figures relating to attendances was tabled. Out of a total of 235 attendees, only 49 were female, which was consistent with previous projects.

The current operational budget for the Rural Youth Work Programme was £10,600. Officers were looking to increase the amount available by funding from Parish Councils and other external sources.

In response to Members' questions, officers advised that the shared services staff structure with Forest Heath for Leisure, Culture and Communities, under whose auspices youth work would operate, was currently being developed. Although services would be provided by a single team, there was no requirement for the two Councils to adopt the same approach to rural youth work in their areas. If members wished rural youth work in St Edmundsbury to be continued at the current time, this would therefore need to be taken into account in formulating the staff structure. While there may be changes to the way in which staff resources were provided in future, the draft budget currently allowed for the existing operational budget for rural youth work in St Edmundsbury to be retained in full for 2013/2014, with an allowance for inflation. In relation to the proposal to seek additional external funding a member suggested that an approach be made to the newly appointed Police Commissioner who had included a sum for youth work in his budget for 2013/2014.



RECOMMENDED:-

That, subject to budgetary provision for 2013/2014 the following be approved:

- (i) the Borough Council continue to fund IPSUM YP, or a similar group, to deliver a 'Wos Up' Project in the Rural Areas of St Edmundsbury and look to work with Parish Councils to increase the number of sessions;***
- (ii) officers be asked to look at what the future format might be for Rural Youth Work under Shared Services arrangements;***
- (iii) officers be asked to investigate relevant external funding to develop other work in the rural areas with the Council's partners, including looking at innovative projects with an aim to increase the participation of females in the Rural Youth Work Programme; and***

(iv) any changes or new recommendations to be followed up by a period of consultation with young people conducted by officers.

20. Dates of Future Meetings

The Working Party had already agreed the following date for a future meeting:

Wednesday 13 March 2013.

The following dates for further future meetings were approved:

Monday 29 July 2013,
Wednesday 30 October 2013,
Monday 27 January 2014, and
Wednesday 26 March 2014.

All meetings to commence at 5.00 pm.

The meeting concluded at 7.08 pm.

**J THORNDYKE
CHAIRMAN**