

ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

RURAL AREA WORKING PARTY

Minutes of a meeting held on Monday 26 March 2014 at 5.00 pm in Room GFR14, West Suffolk House, Western Way, Bury St Edmunds

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

20. Substitutions

No substitutions were declared.

21. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs Broughton and Mrs Wade.

22. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2014 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

23. Declarations of Interests

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

(At this point the Chairman varied the order of the agenda to allow respective officers to be released from the meeting as items were disposed of. Agenda items were dealt with in the following order: 7, 8, 6 and 5. The remainder of the agenda was considered as printed.)

24. Rural Broadband - Update

Peter Ingram, Suffolk County Council, Programme Director, who provided liaison for the implementation of the Better Broadband project in the county, gave an update on progress. Since the end of last year several phases had been undertaken and some of these were complete with currently 25,000 properties being provided with an improved Broadband service. It was anticipated all phases would be finished by the Autumn of 2015. The project had been made possible by public funding of £20 million and contributors included the County Council and all Borough/District Councils in the county. Mr Ingram illustrated progress with the aid of maps which showed the extent of coverage pre- and post the project. An indication of when coverage would be provided for specific villages was indicated by a colour coding. This information was also provided on a website, (link – www.betterbroadbandsuffolk.com). It was explained that the improvements effected by commercial broadband providers would only extend to about 50% of premises and these were mainly in urban areas. The current project with public funding would extend coverage to 80 to 85% of properties. There remained around 15% of properties in isolated locations which would be difficult to reach. A second round of procurement was being embarked upon with a view to covering these properties. The cost involved was likely to be

high and for this reason alternative technology was being investigated so as to reduce this. It was further explained the cabinets which were required to be installed in selected locations in villages would not be live until fibre optic connections were made. Some cabinets were already in situ but it may be some weeks before connections were made. A messaging system would be utilised to give notification that the system in a particular location was live. The recipients of such messages would be the relevant County and Borough Councillors. Works in the highway to install cabinets was being carried out by sub-contractors and the County Council was maintaining an overview to ensure that re-instatement works were satisfactorily carried out.

25. Rural Youth Work Programme

Officers gave an interim oral report. Whilst the 'Wots Up' project was not being run this year, investigations were being carried out into utilising the resources available to stage other mobile youth work programmes in the rural area from a base in Haverhill. Discussions were also in progress with the YMCA to provide staffing for possible schemes with a view to community groups being encouraged to organise events. A further report would be provided to Members by email.

26. Rural Profiling Pilot Project – Progress

The Working Party considered Report E333 (previously circulated) which gave an update on this Project which was being carried out by the Housing Team in partnership with ten villages with the aim of providing Parish Councils with data to allow them to make informed decisions primarily about housing need and how it was to be addressed. This report followed on from Report E67 which had been presented to the Working Party on 29 July 2013. It also sought approval for the data to be used to work proactively by approaches to Parish Councils in other villages in West Suffolk (St Edmundsbury Borough and Forest Heath District Councils) where there was evidence of significant housing need.

By working with the Cambridge Housing Sub-Region, profiling data had been produced for the ten parishes participating in the pilot. Data for all parishes across West Suffolk was also available and this information was up to date as of January 2014. The data would be updated at agreed intervals still to be determined with the Sub-Region.

The data covered the age profile, household composition, tenure and size of properties, affordability of housing and demand for social housing. This broad range of indicators gave a holistic profile of need and allowed need to be assessed across all tenures. The data could be viewed on: <http://atlas.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/Housing/WestSuffolk/atlas.html>

Parish Councils had accessed this information via SharePoint. Some parishes had, however, experienced difficulty accessing the data and had been sent an Excel file to overcome the problem. The data had been found informative in terms of understanding local needs. The main request had been for further information about housing register applications with a local connection to a particular village.

A feedback exercise had been carried out and to date there had been three responses, all had confirmed the usefulness of the data and that the purpose of the rural profiling pilot project had been understood. Two of the responses had expressed a desire to deliver more housing in their village but with reservations because of lack of availability of land. This had given a steer as to how these villages could be assisted and the next steps to be taken.

The data was now available on an interactive map for West Suffolk. This had not yet been shared with parishes but would be provided to them once the Working Party had commented. One of the main advantages of presenting the information in this way was to be able to see easily areas of high demand. The map needed to be simplified and made more accessible before being published on the website. The next step would be to re-contact the ten parishes included in the project to ascertain whether they required any assistance with furthering proposals. Officers commented that the method of provision may not be necessarily through the affordable homes route but could be via a Community Land Trust initiative. A Member expressed the view that more should be done in making sites available in rural areas through changes to planning policy and the emerging Policy DM28 in the emerging Joint Development Management Policies document was referred to in this context.

RESOLVED: That:

- (1) progress with the profiling data and draft interactive map be noted; and
- (2) approval be given to the use of this data for working proactively with villages within West Suffolk where there is evidence of significant housing need by approaches to the relevant Parish Councils.

27. Rural Action Monitoring Report

The Working Party considered Report E332 (previously circulated) which gave an update on the Rural Action Plan 2011 to 2014 and what it had delivered and where areas of activity identified in the report now sat in relation to the new staffing structure and strategic policy framework. A decision on how remaining underspends from the Rural Action Plan were to be utilised was also sought.

The 2011 to 2014 Rural Action Plan had 37 projects which aimed to help the Borough Council achieve its vision for the rural area: '*Active, sustainable and thriving communities in peaceful and unspoilt countryside*'. These projects were what rural communities had told the Council they wanted at that time and, as such, were a 'snap-shot' of rural issues four years ago. The projects came under four headings:

- (a) Empowerment: enabling communities to help themselves (projects 1-8);
- (b) Environment: improving both the built and the natural environment (projects 9-16);
- (c) Prosperity: to generate a healthy economy (projects 17-23); and

- (d) Well-being: actions which improve the quality of life of individuals and communities (projects 24-37).

Some of the projects had been carried out on an annual basis, whilst others had been one-off projects due to be completed by the end of March 2014.

Attached at Appendix 1 was a table outlining progress to date on the delivery of the 37 actions. The table identified the action, whether or not it had been completed and any budget remaining from the original allocation. It indicated where the activities described now sat under the new staffing structure and updated strategic policy framework. The Appendix indicated that:

- 27 Projects had been completed;
- 3 had been partially completed;
- 3 were ongoing until the committed funding was used; and
- 4 were not completed as envisaged – see Appendix 1 for details.

The Working Party was asked to note that, overall, good progress had been made against the Action Plan. However since its adoption, the Council had been restructured, adopted new strategic priorities and new ways of working and carried out extensive consultation on new policy documents, most notably Rural Vision 2031. As a result there were now other ways in which the kinds of initiatives previously drawn together in the Action Plan were being delivered. The final column of Appendix 1 indicated where these kinds of activities were being taken forward under the new structure.

On 25 March 2014 the Cabinet had considered a paper on the option of introducing Locality Budgets for Councillors on a trial basis, with effect from 1 April 2014. If the decision was to introduce this trial it would initially be funded from reserves. To assist in its implementation, the Working Party was invited to recommend to Cabinet that any underspends from the delivery of the 2011 to 2014 Rural Action Plan were put towards the cost of Locality Budgets for rural wards, to ensure this money was used for its original purpose.

In considering the report the Working Party noted that in relation to Paragraph 4.8 there were 18 rural wards and this had consequential amendments of the figures quoted, ie. £45,000 for £47,000 and £135,000 for £148,850. The Working Party received the progress report on the list of schemes contained in Appendix 1. Some typographical and minor textual errors were also noted and officers advised that these would be corrected and an amended Appendix 1 would be provided on the Council's website. The Working party in considering the use of underspends which had arisen from the Rural Action Plan was of the view that these should be retained for future rural initiatives in addition to any Locality Budgets for Councillors agreed and the Rural Initiatives Grant Fund (an item of Capital expenditure).

In relation to item 12 (Upper Stour Valley and The Brecks) Councillor Stevens asked that work be undertaken with a view to designating these locations as Special Landscape Areas and it was agreed that this request be passed on to relevant officers.



RECOMMENDED: That

- (1) the completion of the St Edmundsbury Rural Action Plan 2011 to 2014 and the statement of how rural issues are being taken forward within the new strategic framework, as contained in Appendix 1 to Report E332, be noted; and**
- (2) any remaining underspends from the delivery of the Rural Action Plan 2011 to 2014 be used for future rural initiatives in addition to the Rural Initiatives Grant Scheme and any Locality Budgets allocated to Rural Members.**

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

28. Parish Conference

The Working Party considered a draft agenda for the Parish Conference on 28 April 2014 and agreed the format and content of this, subject to under 'Information items', the proposed reporting on Parish Precepts being included under the item for feedback from the Task and Finish Group, if officers were of the view that this would be appropriate. It was noted that parish representatives would be canvassed during the tea/coffee break on the future of the Borough Council's Rural News publication.

(Councillor Mrs Rushen left the meeting following the discussion of this item.)

29. Work Programme

Members were asked to contact officers if they had items for inclusion in the Working Party's Work Programme.

30. Dates of Future Meetings

The Working Party approved the following dates for future meetings:

28 July 2014;
27 October 2014;
25 January 2015; and
30 March 2015.

All meetings are on Mondays and to commence at 5.00 pm.

The meeting concluded at 7.12 pm.

**J THORNDYKE
CHAIRMAN**

