

## **ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **RURAL AREA WORKING PARTY**

#### **Minutes of a meeting held on Monday 28 July 2014 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, Ray, Redhead,  
Stevens and Mrs Wade

#### **1. Substitutions**

No substitutions were declared.

#### **2. Election of Chairman**

It was proposed, seconded and

RESOLVED:

That Councillor J Thorndyke be elected Chairman of this Working Party.

#### **3. Appointment of Vice-Chairman**

It was proposed, seconded and

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Mrs S O Broughton be elected Vice-Chairman of this Working Party.

#### **4. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Pugh and Mrs Rushen.

#### **5. Minutes**

Subject to it being noted that in Minute 30, Dates of Future Meetings, the date of 25 January 2015 should read 26 January 2015, the minutes of the meeting held on 26 March 2014 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **6. Declarations of Interests**

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

#### **7. Rural Youth Work Programme**

Officers gave an oral update report on the Rural Youth Work Programme for 2014 which would become operational the following day (Tuesday 29 July) with visits to Wickhambrook and Barrow. Venues at Ixworth and Stanton were to be visited on the day following. A contract had

been let to the YMCA to deliver the programme over a nine week period at a cost of £10,000. Members requested that wider publicity for the sessions be given by notices in adjoining parishes with copies of the poster being sent to all Members representing rural wards. It was also suggested that the sessions be advertised on the Borough Council's website and that the Programme's Facebook page be updated. Reference was also made to successful voluntary initiatives for young people organised in Bardwell and Cavendish by respective cricket clubs and it was also suggested that discussions take place with a view to the programme being linked in with these. It was reported that relevant Parish Councils had not been approached to provide contributions to this year's programme but this would be reconsidered next year. Members indicated that there might be a possibility of utilising underspends on Locality Budgets to provide funding to expand this year's programme. The current programme would finish at the end of September. It was requested that a further report be submitted to the 27 October 2014 meeting of the Working Party with attendance figures to enable future provision of the programme to be reviewed.

## **8. Parish Engagement and Future Arrangements for the Working Party**

The Working Party considered Report F73 (previously circulated) which brought together a variety of matters regarding the Working Party and Council's engagement with parishes and the way in which its own agenda could be managed, namely:

- (a) the Parish and Town Council Liaison Group;
- (b) communication with rural communities;
- (c) the next Parish Conference; and
- (d) the Working Party's work programme.

These were all matters which fell to be dealt with by the Working Party or officers but in each case a steer was being sought from Members.

### **(a) Parish and Town Liaison Group**

The Group held its final meeting on 25 June 2014 and a summary of the actions agreed was set out as Appendix 1 to the report.

The Liaison Group was set up, at the request of the parishes themselves, after the October 2013 Parish Conference to look at ways parishes could support each other on financial matters. The Borough Council also took the opportunity to discuss matters with the Group, which had been extremely useful. A number of positive initiatives around issues such as procurement had emerged, and these were fed back to the wider group at the last Parish Conference.

As a group supported by the Borough Council, the Liaison Group felt that it had achieved its objectives and, being task-and-finish, it should end. However, the parishes would continue to work together as a peer group, which was a positive outcome. The Group was also happy to make a final report to the next Parish Conference. The Group did feel that this parish-led model of engaging with Parish and Town Councils (and them supporting each other) was useful, and suggested that a future group could be formed of those parishes (including the Town Council) most directly affected by major growth sites in Bury St Edmunds arising from Vision 2031 e.g. Westley, Great Barton, Rougham, etc. A similar approach could be taken in Haverhill if desired. This group would look at the practical delivery of Vision 2031 from a

parish point of view, for instance understanding likely timescales for development, plans for transport, potential impact on schools and community governance. Members agreed that this suggestion had some merit, and was something that the Borough and County Councils, and potentially developers, could find useful. Autumn/Winter 2014 would be a logical start date, once there was more certainty over the adoption of Vision 2031.

The Group also felt strongly that Parish Conferences should remain the main way in which the Borough engaged with Parish Councils.

The Working Party noted the conclusion of the first task-and-finish group on financial matters, and the proposal for further task-and-finish group(s).

## **(b) Communication with Rural Communities**

At the last meeting it was reported that, as the Rural Action Plan 2011/2014 had reached completion, the Council was reviewing how it shared information with rural communities to ensure this continued to be relevant and convenient, and avoided duplication. Parish Councils were consulted at the last Parish Conference and encouraged to complete a short questionnaire attached to their feedback form about the dissemination of information by the Council. The survey was also sent separately to all parishes, and made available online. Nine respondents from eight Parish Councils completed the questionnaires (Bardwell, Barningham, Chevington, Culford, West Stow and Wordwell, Great Barton, Honington and Sapiston, Kedington (two respondents) and Wickhambrook) and Report F73 contained a summary of the responses.

From these useful results there appeared to be a sense that Rural News was appreciated and regular communication between the Borough and Parish Councils should continue. This communication should be focused on information sharing (i.e. from the Borough Council to the parishes), in the form of a bulletin or newsletter. Two-way dialogue could then take place at Parish Council meetings, Parish Conferences or seminars or separately. In terms of content, the preference appeared to be for practical information about Council-related matters: funding, planning, finances, contact details, etc. although some of this information was being duplicated from other sources.

In terms of format, while the old newsletter was liked, it was not significantly preferred over the idea of a simpler email bulletin. This probably reflected the increasing dominance of this format in communications that respondents received from other organisations. It would also greatly assist the Borough Council if it could focus its reduced officer resources on content rather than design, which an email-style bulletin would allow (the old format was labour intensive to produce). This would also make it consistent with other regular bulletins and could allow linking to other organisations, to avoid the issue of duplication identified by respondents. Care would however need to be taken to ensure that important content in any email bulletin (or linked webpages) was still locally printable if necessary.

As a way forward, it was suggested, therefore, that the Council's Communications Team coordinate a quarterly Rural News email bulletin, which also contained links to relevant material on the Council's or other organisations' websites. The first edition could be issued before the next Parish Conference so that feedback could be obtained.

The Working Party agreed that the quarterly Rural News bulletin should be reinstated in an electronic format but asked that consideration should be given to changing the name to e.g. 'West Suffolk or St Edmundsbury Rural News' to give it a clearer focus and asked that Members be made aware of deadline and issue dates to assist them in carrying out their roles with Parish Councils.

### **(c) Parish Conference**

The Working Party was asked to consider the arrangements for the next Parish Conference this Autumn. It was noted that the Parish and Town Council Liaison Group requested that, in future, dates for these bi-annual conferences be set a year in advance, a suggestion which was supported by the Borough Councillors present. The suggestion therefore was that the next two Conferences be held in October 2014 and, as it is an election year, in late March 2015. Normally the dates were agreed by the Leader (who hosts the Conference). Officers reported that it had not yet been possible to fix a date but that it was hoped one would be identified shortly.

A paper containing responses given by delegates at the Spring 2014 Conference was tabled. This indicated that all respondents found the Conference useful. Various suggestions for improvement had also been put forward.

In terms of location, there was a suggestion at a previous meeting that the Autumn/Winter Conference could again be held in The Apex (but in the main auditorium this time). The Working Party confirmed this arrangement and also agreed that, unless there were special circumstances, the Spring Conference should normally be held in a geographically well placed parish from the point of view of travelling distances for delegates unless there was a particular reason to visit a parish. The Working Party noted the offer to hold a conference at the new village hall in Honington and Sapiston and asked that this be investigated as the venue for the Spring Conference 2015, linked to specific sessions on village hall projects.

The Working Party considered suggestions regarding the content of the Conference and the following possible items were suggested to assist in planning the final agenda:

- (i) Housing needs/profiling (requested by Working Party at its last meeting) (October 2014);
- (ii) Update on planning matters including Vision 2031 and Neighbourhood Plans (October 2014);
- (iii) Developer Contributions (Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106) Agreements (Spring Conference 2015);
- (iv) Feedback from the Parish and Town Liaison Group (the Chairman of the Liaison Group had agreed to do this) (October 2014);
- (v) Demonstration of new Council website, and seeking feedback on the new Rural News (before and after interval October 2014);
- (vi) Elections including Parish Polls (October 2014);
- (vii) Economic Development (October 2014); and

(viii) Locality Budgets (October 2014).

Parishes would also be asked for any further topics they are interested in (so that the agenda continues to be parish-led).

#### **(d) Work Programme**

The Working Party considered its work programme for the remainder of the municipal year, and in particular whether it would be interested in adopting the new way of working being trialled by the Bury St Edmunds Area Working Party. This was not actually dissimilar to the way in which the Rural Area Working Party had often successfully worked itself, but it was more explicit in making a link to the locality working inherent in the new Families and Communities Strategy. It also sought to make stronger connections to partner organisations, and could link to the previous three items in Report F73 discussed in (a) to (c) above.

Under the approach the Bury St Edmunds Area Working Party was testing, there was no change to the current terms of reference of the Working Party, and it could still consider formal items of business when needed. However, its normal mode of working was much more of a discussion forum for locality matters, with a member-led agenda. At meetings themselves, rather than formal committee reports, the Working Party was trialling an approach whereby it invited officers and external representatives to attend and make short presentations, which were then discussed informally. This not only made the process of supporting the meeting more sustainable with reduced officer resources, but, when it worked well, it gave the Working Party a more defined role in the Council's overall governance structure which did not duplicate things going on elsewhere. As a result of the discussions, recommendations could still be made to Cabinet as normal, but usually the discussions were used to give a steer to officers, or partners, from the Ward Member perspective. The meetings could also be used for updates on ongoing matters. Essentially, the Working Party became more of a locality forum. For this reason, all Members for Bury St Edmunds wards and immediately surrounding villages were now invited to attend the Working Party.

The way the agenda was managed was that Members suggested topics (some of which may not be Borough Council matters) at the end of each meeting which were relevant to their ward. In the case of this Working Party, they would also need to have a rural aspect. Generally speaking these would not be matters that a Member could resolve directly with an officer, and should be relevant to more than one ward. If the rest of the Working Party consented, the officers then took away these issues to see if they could be resolved straightaway (the preferred option). If they could not they would be brought back to a future meeting for discussion. The aim was for no more than three significant discussion/presentation topics at each meeting, so some items may be scheduled later in the cycle. Members were also able to suggest issues to the Chairman or officers between meetings, and other Member bodies (e.g. Cabinet or Scrutiny) might also ask the Working Party to look at issues.

The Working Party discussed this suggestion and acknowledged the philosophy behind it but it was of the view that it had been operating along these lines previously, e.g. the discussions on the Rural Youth Work Programme earlier in the meeting and those on Rural Broadband provision which had taken place at the previous meeting. It therefore agreed that

issues affecting rural wards which warranted informal discussions with partner organisations and/or officers should continue to be brought before the Working Party in the way which was now also being adopted by the Bury St Edmunds Area Working Party. The use of presentation and shorter reports was also endorsed. The following were agreed as items for this Working Party's Work Programme:

- (a) Rural Youth Work Programme (October);
- (b) Eligibility of public land holdings for Environmental Enhancement Grants; and
- (c) Rural Public Transport.

### **9. Dates of Future Meetings**

The Working Party had already approved the following dates for future meetings:

Monday 27 October 2014;  
Monday 26 January 2015; and  
Monday 30 March 2015.

In the case of the next meeting it was noted that a Member Development Session had been arranged for 5.30 pm on the same day. It was therefore agreed that the Working Party's meeting should commence at the earlier time of 3.00 pm. The other approved meetings would still have the commencement time of 5.00 pm.

The meeting concluded at 6.25 pm.

**J THORNDYKE  
CHAIRMAN**