



Rural Area Working Party 28 July 2014

Parish Engagement and Future Arrangements for the Working Party

1. Summary and reasons for recommendations

1.1 This paper brings together a variety of matters regarding the Working Party and Council's engagement with parishes and the way in which its own agenda can be managed, namely:

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

2. Recommendations

2.1 That the conclusion of the first task-and-finish Parish and Town Council Liaison Group on financial matters, and the proposal for further task-and-finish group(s) be noted.

2.2 That a quarterly Rural News bulletin be reinstated in an electronic format.

2.3 That the Working Party considers its work programme, and general approach to meetings, for the remainder of the municipal year.

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3. Town and Parish Liaison Group - 25 June 2014

- 3.1 The Group held its final meeting on 25 June and a summary of the actions agreed is set out as Appendix 1 to this report.
- 3.2 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 was extremely useful. A number of positive initiatives around issues such as procurement have emerged, and these were fed back to the wider group at the last Parish Conference.
- 3.3 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 is a positive outcome. The Group is also happy to make a final report to the next Parish Conference.
- 3.4 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. Subject to the views of this Working Party, the officers felt 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.
- 3.5 The Group also felt strongly that Parish Conferences should remain the main way in which the Borough engaged with parish councils, which is relevant to the later section of this report.

3.6 Recommendation: That the conclusion of the first task-and-finish group on financial matters, and the proposal for further task-and-finish group(s) be noted.

4. Communication with Rural Communities

- 4.1 At the last meeting it was reported that, as the Rural Action Plan 2011-2014 reached completion, the Council was reviewing how it shares information with rural communities to ensure this continues to be relevant and convenient, and avoids duplication. Parish councils were consulted at the last Parish Conference and encouraged to complete a short questionnaire attached to their feedback form. The survey was also sent separately to all parishes, and made available online.
- 4.2 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). It is perhaps best to look at this as a useful focus group of parish representatives.

4.3 The responses can be summarised as follows:

- (a) All respondents (100%) had made use of Rural News and there were several complimentary comments about it.
- (b) Asked what they most valued (giving more than one response if needed):
 - o 7 (78%) valued all the content equally/found it all useful to get an idea of what was going on;
 - o 4 (44%) mentioned grants/funding;
 - o 1 (11%) mentioned events;
 - o 1 (11%) mentioned legislation; and
 - o 1 (11%) mentioned using it to update social media and websites.
- (c) 4 (44%) said they also received some of the information in Rural News from other sources (3 said they didn't, and 2 didn't know);
 - o 4 of these mentioned Suffolk Association of Local Councils (SALC);
 - o 3 Community Action Suffolk; and
 - o 1 Suffolk County Council.
- (d) In terms of the information that parishes were asked to provide to their own communities:
 - o 2 (22%) mentioned grants and funding;
 - o 2 (22%) mentioned council contact details;
 - o 2 (22%) mentioned what's on or general community news;
 - o 1 (11%) mentioned transport/road repairs;
 - o 1 (11%) mentioned planning advice; and
 - o 2 (22%) said it varied, or they just wanted to be kept up-to-date.
- (e) In terms of what additional information, if any, they wanted to receive or share, there were very few suggestions. Grants were mentioned again, and also Council contact details (including for display on noticeboards). An annual calendar of meetings (e.g. Parish Conferences) was also mentioned.
- (f) In relation to options for the future, three possibilities were offered (along with "other (please describe)") with a request for them to be ranked in order of preference. Of those who expressed a preference:

	Total 1 st prefs	Total 2 nd prefs	Total 3 rd prefs	Total 4 th prefs
1. A community "noticeboard" on the Council's website, allowing information to be shared two-ways (with email alerts for important new information)	1	0	4	1
2. A simple email bulletin with hyperlinks to relevant articles	3	4	1	0
3. A magazine in the previous newsletter format of Rural News	4	2	0	0
Other: One respondent said they would prefer a "simple email with hyperlinks to relevant articles to be issued 6+ times a year." However, this respondent also gave their first preference as the email bulletin, so this merely reinforces that choice and a view around frequency. No other possibilities were mentioned.				

- (g) As can be seen above, there was a fairly even split of first and second preferences between either the old format or a new email bulletin format (see below). However, creating an interactive section on the Council's website was not popular.
- (h) In response to being asked how their parish could be part of a communications 'cascade' to get important information to communities quickly:
 - 2 (22%) suggested their own website;
 - 2 (22%) suggested emails;
 - 2 (22%) suggested their own newsletter/"free newspaper"; and
 - 1 (11%) suggested Neighbourhood Watch.
- (i) In relation to other comments received, the following points were made:
 - one request to ensure that those who do not access digital sources of information were not excluded;
 - one request that an officer attended one parish council a year (and this be publicised for residents). This would supplement councillor attendance; and
 - one request that the Council continues with "parish seminars" and the chance to talk with officers.

4.4 From these useful results there appears 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.

4.5 In terms of content, the preference appears to be for practical information about council-related matters – funding, planning, finances, contact details, etc – and some of this information is being duplicated from other sources.

4.6 In terms of format, while the old newsletter was liked, it was not preferred hugely over the idea of a simpler email bulletin (which had more first and second preferences combined). This probably reflects the increasing dominance of this format in communications that respondents will receive from other organisations in their daily lives. 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 a very attractive, designed newsletter, supplied as an electronic pdf file, but also printable, which was quite 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. Having said that, care would need to be taken to ensure that important content in any email bulletin (or linked webpages) was still locally printable if necessary.

4.7 As a way forward, it is suggested, therefore, that the Council's communications team coordinate a quarterly Rural News email bulletin, which also contains links to relevant materials 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.

4.8 Recommendation: That a quarterly Rural News bulletin be reinstated in an electronic format.

5. Parish Conference

- 5.1 While there are no recommendations, the Working Party is asked to consider the arrangements for the next Parish Conference this autumn.
- 5.2 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 is that the next two Conferences be held in October 2014 and, as it is an election year, in late March 2015. Normally the dates are agreed by the Leader (who hosts the Conference) and if it is possible to give an indication of possible dates by 28 July, this will be reported orally at the meeting.
- 5.3 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), but this is entirely a matter of preference for the Working Party.
- 5.4 The main issue for the Working Party to decide is content of the Conference. To date the following items have been suggested:
- (a) Housing needs/profiling (requested by Working Party at its last meeting)
 - (b) Update on Vision 2031
 - (c) Developer Contributions (Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106)
 - (d) Feedback from the Parish and Town Liaison Group (the chairman of the Liaison Group has agreed to do this)
 - (e) Demonstration of new council website, and seeking feedback on new Rural News.
- 5.5 In setting a date, parishes will be asked for any further topics they are interested in (so the agenda is parish-led), but the Working Party is invited to make its own suggestions at this meeting as well, and comment on those above.

6. Work Programme

- 6.1 The Working Party may wish to consider its work programme for the remainder of the municipal year, and in particular whether it would be interested in the new way of working recently adopted by the Bury St Edmunds Working Party. This is not actually dissimilar to the way in which the Rural Area Working Party has often successfully worked itself, but it is more explicit in making a link to the locality working inherent in the new Families and Communities Strategy. It also seeks to make stronger connections to partner organisations, and could link neatly to the previous three items in this report.
- 6.2 Under the approach the Bury St Edmunds Area Working Party is testing, there is no change to the current terms of reference of the Working Party, and it can still consider formal items of business when needed. However, its normal mode of working is 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 is trialling an approach whereby it invites officers and external representatives to attend and make short presentations, which are then discussed informally. This not only makes the process of supporting the meeting more sustainable with reduced officer resources, but, when it works well, it gives the Working Party a more defined role in the Council's overall governance structure, which doesn't duplicate things going on elsewhere. As a result of the discussions, recommendations can still be made to Cabinet as normal, but normally the discussions are used to give a steer to officers or partners, from the Ward Member perspective. The meetings can also be used for updates on ongoing matters. Essentially, the Working Party becomes more of a locality forum. For this reason, all Members for Bury St Edmunds wards and immediately surrounding villages are now invited to attend the Working Party.

6.3 The approach is still being refined, but at the last two meetings, there have been presentations and discussions matters such as:

- (a) economic health of the town centre;
- (b) markets;
- (c) litter; and
- (d) maintenance of the River Linnet.

6.4 The way the agenda is managed is that Members suggest topics (some of which may not be Borough Council matters) at the end of each meeting which are relevant to their ward *and (in the case of this Working Party) 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 consents, the officers then take away these issues and see if they can be resolved straight away (the preferred option). If they cannot they can be brought back to a future meeting for discussion. The aim is no more than three significant discussion/presentation topics at each meeting, so some items may be scheduled later in the cycle. Members are also able to suggest issues to the Chairman or officers between meetings, and other Member bodies (e.g. Cabinet or scrutiny) may also ask the Working Party to look at issues.

6.5 Item 7 on this agenda (Rural Youth Work Programme) is an example of how this approach could work, as was the broadband update at the previous meeting, so this is not new to this Working Party. However, the Working Party may also wish to test this approach more systematically in the remainder in the year as the Bury St Edmunds Working Party is.

6.6 Recommendation: That the Working Party considers its work programme, and general approach to meetings, for the remainder of the municipal year.

Action Notes

Town and Parish Liaison Group - 25 June 2014

1. Budget Consultation

Update provided by Rachael Mann (RM) with regards to the current public focus groups to which Town and Parish Councils had been invited.

Action - RM: advise Town and Parish Councils when the feedback following the budget consultation process questionnaire is available.

2. Council Tax Support Grant Review

Update provided by RM following recent communication to Town and Parish Councils. Discussion within the group around feedback following the receipt of the announcement of the review. Comments from parishes present were that they assume the grant is disappearing and that parishes need to be self financing going forward.

3. Update on Community Infrastructure Levy and S106.

Consideration be given to another item at the next parish conference if an update is available.

4. Procurement Matters

Action - Eddie Gibson (EG): EG to work with the Council's procurement manager to move forward the following items to completion:

- (a) Standard Terms & Conditions
- (b) Support for "one-off" or larger procurements (playgrounds, buildings etc.)

Council locality officers can also assist in identifying support.

5. Parish Council finances

Action - EG: EG to consider a template which can be shared amongst the group in order for representatives of the Town and Parish Liaison Group to perform a benchmarking review. This would be carried out entirely independently of the Council, and would seek to identify best practice among a peer group of parishes.

6. Town and Parish Clerks and responsible finance officers - precept setting process and tax base information

Action - RM: RM to put something in the calendar towards the end of September for clerks, financial returning officers and Chairs of finance committees to attend a session around the precept setting process and tax base information.

7. Future of the Liaison Group

- Parish conferences should be kept as the main forum for dialogue between the tiers of local government.
- This task and finish group had achieved its objectives and should cease to meet.
- The model of parish-led task and finish groups had worked well and should remain available as an option.
- Task and finish groups of affected parishes could be set up to look at delivery issues for major growth in the two towns arising from Vision 2031, including community governance.

Parish Conference Feedback Spring 2014

The conference was held at Wickhambrook and was attended by 28 delegates attend. In addition, 28 Borough Councillors and officers attended. Feedback forms were completed by 14 attendees.

1. Leading up to the Conference, do you feel that you received enough information?	
Yes	12 (86%)
No	1 (7%)
No answer	1 (7%)
<i>The "no" respondent was a Borough Councillor who advised that he did not receive notification in Members' News, and had only received his invitation on the day.</i>	

2. Was the Conference useful?	
Yes	14 (100%)
No	0

3. How do you think we can improve the Conference?
<i>Not so long for a break in the middle - we only need a 15 minute break</i>
<i>Better mixture of St Eds staff with attendees</i>
<i>Content is key - Ensure agenda contains currently topical and interesting items</i>
<i>Not always able to hear the comments/ questions of delegates or even speakers</i>
<i>The programme needs to contain the latest information e.g. Community Infrastructure levy</i>
<i>Speak Clearly</i>
<i>The present format with short speakers and a couple of workshops are fine</i>
<i>I think the conference is pitched at the right level. Topics need to be relevant to current issues and information sharing</i>
<i>Clearly a lot of council representatives present. Inform upfront of who is coming and give maximum information</i>

4. Is the length of the Conference:	
About right	12 (86%)
Too long	1 (7%)
Too short	1 (7%)

5. Would you prefer a start time of:	
2pm	1 (7%)
3pm	0
4pm	1 (7%)
5pm	3 (21%)
6pm	8 (57%)
Not stated	1 (7%)

6. What information items and workshops would you like to see at future Parish Conferences?
<i>Election matters and planning</i>
<i>Encouraging economic development in rural areas - SEBC and Parish Council roles</i>
<i>Whatever is topical</i>
<i>Topical items</i>
<i>Planning applications (putting views across from Councillors to borough)</i>
<i>Perhaps a current list of staff and their departments would be useful to hand out</i>
<i>Workshop 2 S106 contributions was not explained properly. Assumed we (the audience) had prior knowledge of what S106 was</i>

7. Any other comments?
<i>Contributors very good information</i>
<i>A more central location might encourage a few more participants</i>
<i>Very topical</i>

An additional comment received subsequently is the offer of Honington & Sapiston to host a future conference in their new hall.