

Update on the Work of the West Suffolk Rural Taskforce

Report No:	CAB/WS/19/028	
Report to and date:	Cabinet	10 September 2019
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Chair of the West Suffolk Rural Taskforce:	Councillor Mike Chester Tel: 01284 850000 Email: mike.chester@westsuffolk.gov.uk	
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Key Decision: <i>(Check the appropriate box and delete all those that do not apply.)</i>	<i>Is this a Key Decision and, if so, under which definition?</i> Yes, it is a Key Decision - <input type="checkbox"/> No, it is not a Key Decision - <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

Decisions Plan: This item is included on the Decisions Plan.

Wards impacted: All rural wards

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Cabinet notes the progress made by the West Suffolk Rural Taskforce.



1. Background / Context

- 1.1 In June 2019, the Cabinet announced a rural taskforce with a view to making recommendations back to Cabinet on how best to ensure the different issues facing residents, communities and businesses in more rural areas (villages and outlying dwellings), as opposed to more urban areas, are taken into account by West Suffolk Council in all of its relevant future activities and decision making.
- 1.2 This report updates Cabinet on the progress made by the West Suffolk Rural Taskforce up to its meeting on 22 August 2019.

2. Composition and meetings of the Taskforce

- 2.1 Following the announcement of the Taskforce, a total of seven Members were nominated to serve on the Taskforce, Councillors Mike Chester, Terry Clements, Mary Evans, Diane Hind, Robin Millar, Karen Richardson, Andrew Smith, John Smith and Jim Thorndyke, with Councillor Mike Chester being appointed by the Leader of the Council, as Chair.
- 2.2 By the time Cabinet meets, the Taskforce will have held four meetings. This report covers the first three meetings which have covered work including reviewing statistical information related to the challenges and opportunities in rural areas; discussing and agreeing a community engagement plan (see below) and members have discussed the key challenges they perceive in their areas. In addition, Members of the Taskforce were invited to the Eastern Region Rural Services Network Seminar on 31 July 2019, which focused on rural health and well-being.
- 2.3 Members of the Taskforce raised concern that the initial timeframes set by Cabinet – with an interim report at this stage and a final report in November 2019 would prove challenging to meet given the desire to undertake a thorough community engagement plan. Whilst recognised this gave the Taskforce the best opportunity to input to the emerging Local Plan, Medium Term Financial Strategy and Strategic Framework, the Chair of the Taskforce has agreed with the Leader of the Council, that the timeframes for reporting final findings may be extended to ensure the Taskforce can fully take into account the outcomes of the community engagement exercise, whilst still being able to feed into the strategic planning work.

3. Engagement Plan

- 3.1 As above, the Taskforce are keen to ensure there is a robust approach to engagement with communities, in order to understand the concerns communities have, and how they feel the Council could address their needs in different ways in future.
- 3.2 With this in mind, the Taskforce has agreed a five-strand engagement approach:
 - Local Members meeting with groups in their communities to discuss the communities thoughts on the strengths and challenges of their area, then providing feedback to the group



- Four community events, hosted by the Taskforce, where Members and community groups are invited to come and discuss their thoughts. These events will be held on:
 - Monday 16 September 2019; 2.30pm to 4pm; Freckenham Village Hall
 - Wednesday 18 September 2019; 5.30pm to 7pm; Stanton Village Hall
 - Monday 23 September 2019; 2.30pm to 4pm; Kedington Royal British Legion Hall
 - Wednesday 25 September 2019; 6pm to 7.30pm; Erksine Centre, Chedburgh
 - A community survey, which will be widely publicised through media and social media, and sent to a wide range of groups within communities.
 - Members of the Taskforce attending meetings of groups that serve communities across the West Suffolk area (such as the SALC regional meeting) to raise awareness of the Taskforce's work and ask for feedback.
 - Inviting specific bodies to come before future meetings of the Taskforce to discuss their thoughts in more detail.
- 3.3 Members of the Taskforce have been keen to ensure that all Members have the opportunity to take part in this engagement plan, ensuring they are briefed and have supporting information to enable them to engage with their communities.

4. Key Priorities

- 4.1 The terms of reference for the Taskforce included a number of areas where research had shown rural areas tend to fare less well such as access to services, transport and housing.
- 4.2 Members of the Taskforce have taken the opportunity to discuss their own thoughts on concerns in their communities. They are keen to recognise that whilst there are common challenges to many communities in West Suffolk, each community is unique. Housing emerged as a common area in discussions, and will become a key area of debate in future meetings. In addition to the items highlighted in terms of reference, Members also raised the following issues:
- Access to skilled jobs within rural communities;
 - How communities support/protect their assets including raising funding
 - Whilst recognising that much progress has been made, access to good mobile phone signal and high speed broadband can be patchy;
 - Fuel Poverty, arising from volatile fuel prices, with many rural households reliant on oil fired heating and cars for transport.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 Over their next meetings, the Taskforce will be discussing these key topics, incorporating feedback from the community engagement, and looking to make recommendations back to Cabinet on what action they believe the Council can take in its future decision making to support rural communities.



6. Consultation and engagement

- 6.1 This report was reviewed by the Rural Taskforce at their meeting on 22 August 2019.

7. Risks

- 7.1 There are no specific risks arising from this report.

