

West Suffolk Rural Taskforce: Review of Action Plan

Report number:	CAB/WS/20/061	
Report to and date:	Cabinet	6 October 2020
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Decisions Plan: The decision made as a result of this report will usually be published within 48 hours and cannot be actioned until five clear working days of the publication of the decision have elapsed. This item is included on the Decisions Plan.

Wards impacted: All rural wards

Recommendations: It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. reviews progress against the action plan and make recommendations for any changes to the proposed activities, as set out in Appendix A to Report number: CAB/WS/20/061; and
2. receives a one-year progress report in spring 2021, at which point, it is anticipated that most of the actions will have been completed, except for those which relate to the West Suffolk Local Plan, which need to await the appropriate phase of local plan development.

1. Context to this report

1.1 In June 2019, Cabinet announced a Rural Taskforce, tasked with 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, were taken into account by West Suffolk Council in all of its relevant future activities and decision making.

1.2 Following the Taskforce's extensive evidence gathering, engagement and analysis work, they presented recommendations to Cabinet. On 14 January 2020 Cabinet agreed an action plan, designed to implement the recommendations of the Taskforce, and to be taken forward by officers and overseen by Cabinet. Cabinet also agreed to a six-month review of progress against the actions.

1.3 The six-month review was delayed for two months due to many of the officers responsible for progressing the Rural Taskforce action plan being reassigned to COVID-19 response work. There have also been a number of further developments that are relevant to the action plan.

1.4 This report therefore updates Cabinet on progress in implementing the agreed actions and summarises some of the wider developments that have affected the Council's role in supporting West Suffolk's more rural areas.

1.5 Progress against actions

1.5.1 The updated action plan attached at Appendix A shows the progress made in implementing the actions since January 2020. Progress has been inevitably slower than anticipated (for example, on transport initiatives), but in some areas (for example, communities initiatives), progress has been accelerated due to initiatives that have been developed in rural areas in response to COVID-19.

1.5.2 Given that further work remains to be done, it is recommended that Cabinet receives a further one-year progress report in spring 2021, at which point, it is anticipated that most of the actions will have been completed, except for those which relate to the West Suffolk Local Plan, which need to await the appropriate phase of local plan development.

1.6 Wider developments affecting rural areas since January 2020

1.6.1 Response to COVID-19: national context

The Centre for Rural Economy at Newcastle University has published a helpful briefing note setting out how COVID-19 has impacted specifically on rural areas. The report relates to the earlier stages of COVID-19, but while some of the impacts may have diminished, their economic effects are likely to be long lasting:

www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/centreforruraleconomy/files/researchreports/CRE-briefing-Covid19-and-rural-economies.pdf

- 1.6.2 The report highlights a number of issues, which in large part reflect the existing strengths of, and challenges facing, rural areas. In summary:
- rural areas generally have an **ageing population**, and therefore more residents who are shielding or self-isolating, which in turn impacts on volunteer capacity and some out-of-home spending;
 - there are challenges to home working and home schooling due to **broadband connectivity** issues in rural areas;
 - given the impact on the food **supply chain of hospitality industry** closures, and **shortages of migrant labour**, there are likely to be impacts on areas where agriculture is a major business sector;
 - existing issues with **access to healthcare** in rural areas are likely to be exacerbated due to COVID-19 both in terms of physical health and mental health;
 - on the one hand, there are opportunities for rural communities to make use of already **strong volunteering and neighbourhood networks**. But on the other hand many of these Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations are already **financially stretched**;
 - rural assets such as **village halls and village shops** may face challenges as a result of closure or lack of custom due to COVID-19;
 - rural economies with higher levels of **self-employment and small and micro-enterprises** with limited solvency and cash reserves are likely to be less prepared to weather COVID-19 disruption;
 - meanwhile, it is also likely that COVID-19 will stimulate many examples of **innovative community and business responses and adaptation** across rural areas, and from which learning should be distilled.
- 1.6.3 In large part, the conclusions of the Newcastle University work serve to emphasise that the actions recommended by the Rural Taskforce continue to be relevant following the outbreak of COVID-19, and indeed are focusing on the right areas.
- 1.6.4 **Response to COVID-19: West Suffolk context**
During the early stages of COVID-19, a significant community response was developed, whereby West Suffolk Council co-ordinated the activities of a large number of voluntary groups and businesses who were offering to provide support to vulnerable individuals who were isolated and in need of help.
- 1.6.5 As a result of organisations and individuals working together on the community response, there were a number of positive developments that relate to the 'Strong Communities' actions of the Rural Taskforce Action Plan.

1.6.6 As a result of organisations and individuals working together on the community response, there were a number of positive developments that relate to the 'Strong Communities actions of the Rural Taskforce Action Plan.

1.6.7 A presentation was given to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 3 September 2020, outlining how the community response worked and some of the positive developments that arose from it. The full presentation is available here:

<https://democracy.westsuffolk.gov.uk/documents/s38165/Reflections%20on%20the%20Community%20Response%20to%20Covid.pdf>

1.6.8 Some of the positive developments can be summarised as follows:

- close partnership working with Community Action Suffolk (CAS) and Suffolk Association of Local Councils (SALC)
- support from CAS for new and existing community organisations
- over 400 community groups, charities and businesses worked to support vulnerable people
- 90 per cent of parish and town councils were involved in the community response
- 57 volunteers (through the TRIBE app) were matched to local organisations

1.6.9 The report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee also highlighted individual case studies. For example, in Risby, volunteers provided the community response to the village which was led by a retired nurse. The parish council supported the activity. Following restrictions easing residents have been keen to support the parish council in reviewing and enhancing the village emergency plan. The local volunteers worked together with local assets such as the take-away to ensure need was being met within the village and to look at how future need can be met.

1.7 **Looking to the future**

1.7.1 As work continues on both responding to COVID-19 and planning for recovery, the Council will continue to ensure that the needs and views of rural communities are embedded in decision making. This is achieved through a number of mechanisms, both through formal emergency planning work and business as usual liaison and engagement.

1.7.2 Officers will continue to advise portfolio holders on any specific proposals that emerge that will have an impact on rural areas, for example, the Government's Planning White Paper and Devolution White Paper, while in the meantime continuing to press ahead with implementation of the Rural Taskforce actions.

2. **Alternative options that have been considered**

2.1 Given the focus on the response and recovery phases of COVID-19, it would have been possible not to continue with the implementation of the Rural

Taskforce actions. However, many of the actions are integral to ensuring rural areas make a strong recovery from the pandemic and as such work has continued.

3. Consultation and engagement undertaken

- 3.1 The outcomes of the Rural Taskforce's consultation were taken into account in developing the action plan.

4. Risks associated with the proposals

- 4.1 There is an ongoing risk that the resources required to implement the action plan will not be available. However, this risk will be monitored and Cabinet advised of further delays in implementation at the annual review of the action plan in spring 2021.

5. Implications arising from the proposals

Please note that the implications below focus on the outcomes of the action plan at present. As more detailed actions are developed (where appropriate) specific assessment will need to be undertaken to evaluate the implications of each action.

- 5.1 Financial – there are no specific financial implications arising from this report.
- 5.2 Legal Compliance – no implications.
- 5.3 Personal Data Processing - no implications.
- 5.4 Equalities – the Taskforce expect that equality impacts should be positive as a result of their work, however this would need to be subject to further assessment based on each action.
- 5.5 Crime and Disorder – the Council has a duty to consider the potential impact of its decisions on crime and disorder. It is hoped that the recommendations of the Taskforce will have a positive impact on the potential for reducing crime and disorder in rural areas but again, assessment would be required based on each action
- 5.6 Environmental or sustainability – The Taskforce have taken into account environmental considerations in the formation of their recommendations. It is hoped that the recommendations may have a positive impact on the environment, for example encouraging greater use of public transport in rural areas, but further assessment would be required based on each action.
- 5.7 HR or Staffing - no implications.
- 5.8 Changes to existing policies - no implications.

- 5.9 Impact on other organisations – the Taskforce’s recommendations specifically state potential partner organisations that will need to be involved with implementing recommendations. Officers have made partner organisations aware of the nature of the recommendations to Cabinet and will communicate on a more formal basis after the Cabinet meeting.

6. Appendices referenced in this report

- 6.1 Appendix A – Rural Taskforce Action Plan including updates as at September 2020

7. Background documents associated with this report

- 7.1 [CAB/WS/20/008](#) – West Suffolk Rural Taskforce – final recommendations: Cabinet 14 January 2020