

West Suffolk Rural Taskforce: Final Report on Implementation of Recommendations

Report number:	CAB/WS/21/039	
Report to and date:	Cabinet	21 September 2021
Cabinet member:	Councillor John Griffiths Leader of the Council Tel: 07958 700434 Email: john.griffiths@westsuffolk.gov.uk	
Lead officer:	Jill Korwin Strategic Director Tel: 01284 757252 Email: jill.korwin@westsuffolk.gov.uk	

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

Recommendation: It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Note the progress made in implementation of the Taskforce's recommendations; and
2. Agree that the ongoing activity, initiated as a result of the Taskforce, should be 'mainstreamed' into programmes of work and no longer reported on separately.

1. Background

- 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 three months due to many of the officers responsible for progressing the Rural Taskforce action plan being reassigned to COVID-19 response work. Cabinet received its first progress report on 6 October 2020.
- 1.4 The next six-month report, which had been due in Spring 2021, was also delayed due to the pressures that dealing with the second wave of COVID placed on West Suffolk Council and the partner organisations involved in implementing the Rural Taskforce's recommendations.
- 1.5 This report therefore updates Cabinet on progress in September 2021 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.

2. Proposals within this report

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 Given the stage that work on many of the recommendations has reached, it is now recommended that this is the last separate report to Cabinet on the specific suite of actions from the Rural Taskforce, and that they are now 'mainstreamed' into ongoing work programmes.

3. Wider developments affecting rural areas

- 3.1 The report to Cabinet in October 2020 included a number of examples of ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic had particularly affected rural areas. Many of these have been highlighted further in more recent research published by Newcastle University in March 2021. The research highlighted the negative impact of lockdowns on rural areas who were heavily reliant on tourism and hospitality; the impact on learning and work of rural digital exclusion; and the important role of the voluntary and community sector. [rural lives - covid-19 lockdowns and financial hardship in rural areas final 05.05.21.pdf \(rurallives.co.uk\)](https://www.rurallives.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/rural-lives-covid-19-lockdowns-and-financial-hardship-in-rural-areas-final-05.05.21.pdf)
- 3.2 Meanwhile, the more positive developments in West Suffolk during the COVID-19 pandemic that were identified in the October 2020 Cabinet report around the 'Strong Communities' theme, have been echoed in national research. The Government's Community Life Survey, carried out between April 2020 and March 2021 found that the highest percentage of UK residents on record volunteered informally at least once a month, during the first year of the pandemic – a pattern that appeared to be replicated in West Suffolk. Further findings from the Community Life Survey can be found on this webpage: [New Government survey results underline community spirit generated during pandemic - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-government-survey-results-underline-community-spirit-generated-during-pandemic)
- 3.3 There have also been some positive announcements from Government affecting rural areas in the period since the last update, for example:
- In April 2021, Government announced its intention to change the laws relating to mobile phone masts to improve mobile phone connectivity for people who live, work and travel in rural areas (April 2021). Further information is available on this webpage: [New laws to wipe out rural mobile 'not spots' and speed up rollout of next-generation 5G technology - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-laws-to-wipe-out-rural-mobile-not-spots-and-speed-up-rollout-of-next-generation-5g-technology)
 - In August 2021, Government announced further roll-out of Project Gigabit which aims to give people in rural England access to the fastest broadband speeds on the market. Suffolk is on phase 1b of the project, with procurement due to take place in February 2022 and the contract commencing in January 2023. The programme is intended to cover 92,000 properties. Further information is available on this webpage: [Two million rural homes and businesses to benefit in £5 billion broadband upgrade - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/two-million-rural-homes-and-businesses-to-benefit-in-5-billion-broadband-upgrade)

4. Ensuring the work of the Rural Taskforce is embedded in the future work of West Suffolk Council

- 4.1 Following the formal end of the Rural Taskforce's work, West Suffolk Council will continue to ensure the views, needs and challenges of rural residents and businesses are factored into its work in the following ways:
- Continued implementation of specific recommendations through 'mainstream' work programmes, that will be monitored through the wider business planning framework
 - Implementation of the council's approach to 'places', as set out in the Ways of Working in the Strategic Framework [Strategic framework \(westsuffolk.gov.uk\)](https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk). This approach relies heavily on the role of local ward members as champions of their local areas, supported by the Families and Communities approach
 - Effective use of data and intelligence to provide a clear evidence base of where issues are different in more urban or rural areas, including through ward reports and use of the Suffolk Observatory
 - Highlighting of differential impacts on rural residents through the use of Equality Impact Assessments, which include a 'rural proofing' test
 - Strong partnerships with town and parish councils and the voluntary and community sector
 - Lobbying of other organisations and central government on rural issues, including through the Rural Services Network
 - Horizon scanning and research on rural issues, including through weekly policy alerts
 - Targeted engagement through consultation exercises, ensuring rural residents are able easily to contribute their views

5. Alternative options

- 5.1 It would be possible to continue to monitor and report on progress in implementing the Rural Taskforce's recommendations as a discrete set. However, given the time that has elapsed since the original recommendations were made, many have now become integrated into ongoing work programmes. It would therefore become increasingly complex to report in this way and a potential distraction from focusing on the actions themselves.

6. Consultation and engagement undertaken

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

7. Risks associated with the proposals

- 7.1 There is a risk that the actions from the Rural Taskforce will not be taken forward if they are no longer reported on as a set. However, individual Portfolio Holders will still be accountable for their completion through business-as-usual work programmes.

8. Implications arising from the proposals

- 8.1 Financial – there are no specific financial implications arising from this report.
- 8.2 Equalities – the Taskforce expect that equality impacts should be positive as a result of their work, however any specific initiatives arising from the recommendations that have a potential impact on equalities will be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment.
- 8.3 Crime and Disorder – the Council has a duty to consider the potential impact of its decisions on crime and disorder. It is anticipated that the actions in this report will all have a positive or neutral impact on crime and disorder.
- 8.4 Environmental or sustainability – the taskforce have taken into account environmental considerations in the formation of their recommendations. It is anticipated that the recommendations will 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.
- 8.5 External organisations (such as businesses, community groups) – officers have been working with a number of partner organisations to implement the recommendations of the Taskforce.

9. Appendices referenced in this report

- 9.1 Appendix A – Rural Taskforce Implementation - Action Plan (including updates as at September 2021)

10. Background documents associated with this report

- 10.1 [Report number: CAB/WS/19/006](#) - Proposal to Establish a West Suffolk Rural Taskforce (Cabinet: 25 June 2019)
- 10.2 [Report number: CAB/WS/19/028](#) - Update on the Work of the West Suffolk Rural Taskforce (Cabinet: 10 September 2019)
- 10.3 [Report number: CAB/WS/20/061](#) and [Appendix A](#) - West Suffolk Rural Taskforce: Review of Action Plan (Cabinet: 6 October 2020)