

ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

RURAL AREA WORKING PARTY

Minutes of a meeting held on Monday 27 October 2014 at 3.00 pm in Room GFR14, West Suffolk House, Western Way, Bury St Edmunds

PRESENT: Councillor J Thorndyke (Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Broughton, Clifton-Brown, Pugh, Ray,
Redhead, Mrs Rushen, Stevens and Mrs Wade

10. Substitutions

No substitutions were declared.

11. Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence were received.

12. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 July 2014 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

13. Declarations of Interests

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

14. Rural Public Transport

The Chairman welcomed Phil Magill, Public Transport Operations Manager, Suffolk County Council to the meeting. Mr Magill advised that he had responsibility for planning and procurement of public transport along with schools transport which the County Council had a statutory duty to provide. Members referred to difficulties persons living in rural parts of the Borough had in relation to public transport. In response Mr Magill advised that the way in which bus operators worked was an historical one, whereby they customarily operated along the same historic routes and to the same timetable. Bus services had therefore not been responsive to changes in society, e.g. shift or flexible working, or modern day demands.

The County Council received criticism for subsidising what appeared to be empty buses and yet there was great public concern when these same services were withdrawn. Currently in Suffolk the County Council spent £19 million on schools transport. £2.6 million on rural bus services and £8 million on concessionary bus travel. Central government grants were being 'top sliced' which meant the County Council had to find funds from within its own budget to sustain this expenditure. With increasing costs of contracts with bus operators this had the consequence of cutbacks to those services which were difficult to justify. The Transport Act 1985 which had de-regulated bus services had greatly reduced the control local authorities had over the provision of bus services. It had also introduced constraints on experimental usage of bus services. The mandatory requirement to provide concessionary travel to older people also meant that, in some areas, passengers eligible for this support, had been unable to save services at risk by making a small

voluntary contribution to the cost of their fare. However, despite these challenges, one of the biggest barriers to improving services was not always knowing what the public actually wanted of their public transport system.

Members acknowledged the difficulties which existed, particularly the inability or unwillingness of people to opt for planned journeys rather than using their own personal vehicles. It was pointed out that bus operating times did not synchronise with railway timetables and that bus routes did not always serve primary facilities, e.g. hospitals, which people wished to travel to. Reference was also made to other providers of transport e.g. the NHS Hospital Transport Service and in some cases, local supermarkets who provided buses for shoppers. It was felt that there needed to be an integrated approach, involving all providers towards serving transport needs. Towards this end the existing legislation needed to be reviewed and changes made to allow improvements to be made to the public transport network. In relation to this view reference was made to the current lobby being mounted by the Local Government Association's Rural Network.

In response Mr Magill advised that a conference would be staged on 16 January 2015 to address public transport issues to which local MPs, local authorities and stakeholders would be invited to attend. Members welcomed this initiative and asked officers to ensure that there would be elected member representation from the Borough Council at the conference. Mr Magill also reported that local bus companies had recently agreed to participate in a Bus Partnership in co-operation with the County Council.

Mr Magill was thanked for his attendance.

(Councillors Pugh and Mrs Wade arrived at the meeting during the discussion of this item)

15. Rural Youth Programme

Officers gave an oral update in relation to the Rural Youth Programme for 2014/2015. It was reported that, unfortunately, because of the resignation of a member of staff employed by the contracted provider sessions had not been run during the summer months. There was an intention to run four sessions in Barrow, Wickhambrook, Stanton and Ixworth during the current half term holiday period. From the current year's budget of £10,600 there was therefore an underspend of £8,900 for which there was an option for Members to roll over this amount into 2015/2016 with a view to provide extra sessions during that year or to undertake 'pump priming' work with Parish Councils and/or voluntary organisations in other parishes, and link to other work being carried out under the Council's Families and Communities Strategy.

The Working Party was of the view that this matter warranted further examination and it was agreed that Councillors Thorndyke, Ray, Mrs Rushen and Mrs Wade would meet with relevant officers for further discussion with a report back being made to the next meeting of the Working Party on 26 January 2015.

16. Town and Parish Conference October 2014: Feedback

In relation to this item a paper was tabled which gave information on responses received from 27 delegates who had attended this event. The responses received indicated that there was a unanimous view that the conference was useful. Comments made on the arrangements for the

conference were also generally favourable. Several topics had been suggested by parishes for future conferences, and these were added to by the Working Party. Officers undertook to investigate the suggestion that there should be fewer presentations with these being made the subject of a workshop session instead. It was felt that there should always be two or three workshop sessions and that an edition of Rural News should be issued to coincide with parish conferences. It was noted that the next conference would be held at Honington and Sapiston Village Hall and the Autumn conference would be at a venue in Haverhill.

(Mrs Broughton left the meeting during the discussion of this item and did not return)

17. Work Programme

(a) Environmental Enhancement Grants

In relation to this item officers advised that Diane Ling of the Suffolk Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group had agreed to discuss this matter with the Working Party in early 2015. The timing of this was because a Government publication on the scheme was expected this Autumn. Officers were asked to liaise with the Chairman of the Bury St Edmunds Area Working Party regarding this matter because of a possible interest by that Working Party in areas of open space in the town e.g. The Leg of Mutton.

(b) West Suffolk Guide for Parish and Town Councils

As part of the new approach to communication between the Borough Council and Parish and Town Councils, it had been agreed previously that the Council's rural webpages would be updated in the form of a guide for parish and town councils. In that regard, a list of relevant services that the Borough Council provided and/or information from the Borough Council which parishes and towns most needed was tabled. Members commented that there were no references to SALC or the County Council services of Rural Public Transport and Highways in the list. It was also noted that the guide would identify where Parish and Town Councils could undertake a greater role in services themselves. Members of the Working Party were asked to give feedback to officers on any other aspects of the proposed guide, and to take part in the testing of the draft guide before it went 'live'.

(c) Other Items

Members asked that the following be included on future agendas:

- Rural Public Transport
- "Rural Deprivation Interventions" (national good practice)
- Training Grants for Small Business: Rural Aspects
- Wool Towns Initiative
- SPARSE lobbying re rural funding

18. Dates of Future Meetings

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

Monday 26 January 2015; and
Monday 30 March 2015.

Both meetings to commence at 5.00 pm.

The meeting concluded at 5.05 pm.

**J THORNDYKE
CHAIRMAN**