

Local Economy Scrutiny Panel – 22nd July 2008

Rural Economy Informal Scrutiny Group

Report of the Chair of the Rural Economy Informal Scrutiny Group

Purpose of the Report

To provide feedback and recommendations from the investigations of the Rural Economy Informal Scrutiny Group into the key issues affecting rural locations.

The review also accorded with two of the four roles of Overview and Scrutiny, in that it:

- contributes to the development and review of key Council policies and programmes, and:
- reviews the overall benefit to the public from services provided by the City Council and other organisations.

Links to the Corporate Strategy

This report impacts on the corporate priority relating to economic prosperity, and also links with the corporate priority of safe and strong communities.

Executive Summary

The Informal Scrutiny Group was established to consider the service provided to rural economies and communities by Winchester City Council and its partners. The group agreed to focus on five main areas, recognising that the entire issue is more complicated than these areas alone;

- rural transport
- the 'LEADER' funding bid to SEEDA
- market town health checks
- redundant rural buildings
- rural tourism

The group heard evidence from Winchester City Council and Hampshire County Council (HCC) officers, and officers from Winchester Area Community Action, the local council for voluntary services.

Having taken this evidence into account the group suggests a number of recommendations to improve conditions in rural areas, as set out below.

Recommendations

The group recommends that Cabinet progresses the following recommendations:

- encourage Hampshire County Council (HCC) to provide more assistance with marketing of community transport schemes, including promotion to young people, alongside making MIDAS training more accessible to volunteers;
- pursue HCC's proposal of a directory of transport services in Hampshire;
- ask HCC to explain what they can do to enhance young people's concessionary travel in order for them to access vocational training and employment;
- review the Council's subsidy for community transport to determine whether it should be more specifically targeted at schemes which cater for young people and what the cost implications would be of doing this;
- consider whether the 'LEADER' Local Action Group should be asked to prioritise projects which would promote rural transport, young people or tourism;
- consider holding further events for landowners and agents, perhaps on a regular/annual basis, to broaden understanding of planning policies and issues;
- influence the end use of redundant rural buildings to avoid heavy industrial use where possible;
- progress Local Development Framework policies on reuse of rural buildings, taking account of Government policy, consultation results, etc;
- continue to support community planning initiatives such as market town health checks and parish plans.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Interim report of the Rural Economy Informal Scrutiny Group



Local Economy Scrutiny Panel

Rural Economy Informal Scrutiny Group

July 2008

SCRUTINY REVIEW

FINAL REPORT OF THE RURAL ECONOMY INFORMAL SCRUTINY GROUP

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At its meeting on 16 July 2007, the Local Economy Scrutiny Panel agreed to establish an Informal Scrutiny Group to have an overview of the Rural Economy.
- 1.2 Councillors Cook, Cooper, Goodall and Stephens were appointed to the Group from the Rural Economy Scrutiny Panel, with Councillors Biggs and Busher from the Environment Scrutiny Panel. Councillor Cooper acted as its Chair.

2. Scope of the Review

- 2.1 The scope of the review was agreed as follows:
To examine current work and initiatives relating to the rural economy, with a view to recommending to Cabinet where changes, further work or policy development are required. The Group will pay particular attention to scrutinising issues and value for money in the areas of (i) rural transport, (ii) young people, and (iii) tourism.
- 2.2 In the course of its work to date, the Group has spoken to Stuart Banks from Winchester Area Community Action, Andrew Wilson, Head of Passenger Transport at Hampshire County Council, Andy Hickman, Head of Access and Infrastructure, Steve Lincoln, Community Planning Manager and Kate Crawford, Economic Development Officer, all from Winchester City Council. They reviewed progress being made against the actions relating to the rural economy.

3. Background

- 3.1 At the first meeting of the Informal Scrutiny Group in October 2007, it was clear that there was already a significant amount of work being carried out in certain areas of the rural economy, as well as cross-working between partners. The group started by pulling together their thoughts on rural issues using a 'mind map'. From this, they prioritised the areas they wished to focus on. The clear areas for further investigation were;

- Rural Transport
- LEADER funding
- Market town health checks
- Redundant rural buildings
- Rural tourism

These areas differed slightly from those initially identified (see paragraph 2.1 above) but the Group felt they would cover the key areas of rural transport, young people and tourism.

4. Findings

4.1 **Rural Transport**

- 4.1.1 A presentation was received from Stuart Banks, Winchester Area Community Action (WACA), on the community transport schemes currently available in the Winchester District. Schemes run by WACA included Dial-a-Ride and Community Transport.
- 4.1.2 Dial-a-Ride is a book in advance service, providing door to door transport, but due to the lack of volunteer drivers this was not able to run at evenings or weekends. This

service was subsidised by both Winchester City Council and Hampshire County Council, and is up for tender in 2008.

- 4.1.3 Community Transport was a service providing vehicles for group hire. These vehicles could be booked by any individual or organisation, as long as they could provide their own MIDAS trained driver. This training takes time and costs, so such drivers can be hard to find.
 - 4.1.4 Across Winchester there are approximately 40 different community transport schemes, most of which the public were not aware of due to lack of publicity and resources. However, there was funding available from Hampshire County Council to assist people with their community transport schemes and the group felt that more should be spent on marketing these schemes to the community.
 - 4.1.5 Winchester City Council is the travel concessions authority, dealing with free bus passes, and runs the Park and Ride scheme. The City Council also provides small scale grants to community transport groups and helps fund MIDAS driver training. A fund had been established for 07/08 to support rural transport initiatives.
- 4.2 Information Pilots**
- 4.2.1 Andrew Wilson from Hampshire County Council reported that there were information pilots being carried out across the County, including Winchester, which would look at different ways of providing and coordinating transport schemes. This would provide an inventory of every transport scheme available, but would be very resource intensive. The County Council was keen to encourage community transport and was investigating the best way to disseminate information about these schemes to the community.
 - 4.2.2 It was noted that there was a lack of transport to and from rural areas, especially affecting young people in the evenings and at weekends.
- 4.3 LEADER Funding**
- 4.3.1 This is a joint bid with East Hampshire District Council and, if awarded, the £2,250,000 funding would be spent over five years. This funding would not be spent on Winchester town itself as the money was designed for the rural areas of the District. The result of the bid should be received on 9th May 2008 and the Council would support the Local Area Group (LAG) in allocating funding for projects up to £50,000 each. This would have to be matched by private sector funding sources. It was agreed that the communities would have to be made aware of the funding, should the bid be successful.
 - 4.3.2 The ISG is happy with the funding put into the development of this funding bid, by way of staff time and resources. It has been a highly valuable part of the process, and the research will be informative for other purposes whether the funding bid is successful or not.
- 4.4 Redundant Rural Buildings**
- 4.4.1 A public seminar was held on 23 January 2008 for local landowners and agents to explain how the planning process could make it easier to use rural buildings for economic purposes, instead of just housing. Positive feedback had been received from this seminar and a second event would possibly be held. There were concerns raised that buildings would be used purely for housing and about the increased level of traffic that this would generate.
 - 4.4.2 The ISG discussed the resultant uses of currently redundant rural buildings, and the planning implications of these uses. It was agreed that heavy industry is not generally

a good use for redundant rural buildings, due to the large vehicles that would need to access the site through unsuitable, narrow lanes.

4.5 **Market Town Health Checks**

- 4.5.1 Market Town Health Checks were in progress for four towns in Winchester: Alresford, Bishops Waltham, Wickham and Denmead. The Rural Towns Development Officer post had come to the end of its contract in January 2008 but, with funding from LABGI, this post would be extended for a further 12 months to help support key communities. Alresford have almost finished their health check and action plan, and are currently bidding for funding to support their Putting Pedestrians First project. This forms part of a wider agenda to support community planning across the district and complements support that is provided for parish plans in the smaller parishes and neighbourhood plans in the urban area of Winchester.
- 4.5.2 The ISG noted that the post of Rural Towns Development Officer is very important to continue the theme of hub communities, as set out in LDF consultation documents, in addition to the community planning work the post has responsibility for. This post should be extended beyond its current twelve month lifespan.

5. Conclusions and next steps

- 5.1 The Group was impressed with the number of community transport schemes in operation but concerned that they did not be widely publicised. The Group felt there may be scope for some schemes to help more in providing access to facilities and entertainment for young people, which would help address its concerns in this area. This is not something that could be addressed through the re-tender of Dial-a-Ride as this is already taking place, and is aimed at the elderly and infirm. There may be scope to extend concessionary travel to help young people. Further work would be useful on the scope to improve community transport schemes and how the subsidy that the City Council provided for this might be increased or more effectively targeted.
- 5.2 The Group noted that the LEADER funding bid was well advanced and all the ground work had been done in the hope of a favourable outcome. The scope of the project would enable schemes to be brought forward which could benefit a number of the Group's key areas of interest (rural transport, young people and tourism). The City Council may wish to ask the Local Advisory Group to prioritise these areas in considering projects for funding.
- 5.3 The success of the landowner and agents event in January 2008 was noted and a second event would be welcomed if there was sufficient interest from likely participants. Planning policies on the reuse of rural buildings are well established in Government planning guidance, as well as in the Council's Local Plan, and strongly favour employment uses. The Core Strategy 'Issues and Options' paper identifies some alternative options for such policies, such as a more relaxed approach towards certain residential uses. The Council will decide on its preferred approach, subject to the need for the Core Strategy to be independently examined.
- 5.4 Market town health checks are underway in a number of key settlements, with Parish Plans in others. Market town health checks should take place in the 'Key Hubs' which are ultimately identified through the LDF Core Strategy, with Parish Plans in smaller settlements. The Council is committed to helping these initiatives through its community planning function.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1 The Group recommends that Cabinet progresses the following recommendations:
- Encourage HCC to provide more assistance with marketing of community transport schemes, including promotion to young people, alongside making MIDAS training more accessible to volunteers;
 - To pursue HCC's proposal of a directory of transport services in Hampshire;
 - Consider asking HCC to explain what they can do to enhance young people's concessionary travel in order for them to access vocational training and employment;
 - Review the Council's subsidy for community transport to determine whether it should be more specifically targeted at schemes which cater for young people and what the cost implications would be of doing this;
 - Consider whether the LEADER Local Advisory Group should be asked to prioritise projects which would promote rural transport, young people or tourism;
 - Consider holding further events for landowners and agents, perhaps on a regular annual basis, to broaden understanding of planning policies and issues;
 - To influence the end use of redundant rural buildings to avoid heavy industrial use where possible.
 - Progress Local Development Framework policies on reuse of rural buildings, taking account of Government policy, consultation results, etc;
 - That the Council continues to support community planning initiatives such as market town health checks and Parish Plans.