

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE RURAL ISSUES TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Officer contact: Jemma Durkan (Senior Democratic Services Officer) 01494 421365, jemma.durkan@wycombe.gov.uk

What is the Commission being asked to do?

- i) To consider the recommendations of the Rural Issues Task and Finish Group as outlined below;
- ii) To decide on whether to endorse, amend or reject these recommendations for referral onto the Cabinet Meeting of 2 February 2017; and
- iii) To note that the Rural Issues Task and Finish Group has now completed its work.

Task and Finish Group Recommendations -

1.1 That Cabinet be recommended:

- a) That superfast broadband is a key infrastructure requirement to be provided as a similar service to utilities for new homes in rural areas in the district, and the current Connected Counties project providing superfast broadband continue to be monitored and provided to the more difficult rural areas in the district.

Reason for this Recommendation

The Task and Finish Group were concerned at the lack of superfast broadband being provided to new rural homes and that developers should be obligated to provide this to any new homes being built. Also developers should provide the facility to a point within dwellings so that superfast broadband can be accessed as soon as a property is occupied. As many people now work and run businesses from home in rural areas superfast broadband is a key element of maintaining and developing a successful business and developing the rural economy.

The third phase of the Connected Counties project would provide superfast broadband to the final 5% of homes not yet connected. It was noted that this would be the most difficult to reach areas and this part of the project should be monitored to ensure that delivery outcomes are met and all homes in rural areas have access to superfast broadband.

- b) That Affordable Rural Housing built in the District be kept as such if sold in the future on the open market.

Reason for this Recommendation

There was concern that if an affordable rural property was sold on the open market this would then become unaffordable to residents in the local area. As affordable rural housing was not in large supply it was important for legislation to be in place to protect the status of these properties for local residents to access in the future.

- c) That rural parish councils be supported by Wycombe District Council in providing a Local Housing Needs Survey if any parish council in the District choose to investigate a need for affordable rural housing.

Reason for this Recommendation

This would provide support for local parish councils if they wish to provide affordable rural housing for their residents and if developers show an interest in an area in their parish for development. A Local Housing Needs Survey would show evidence of affordable rural housing requirement in their parish.

- d) That organisations such as The Caravan Club be contacted to promote tourist campsites in the District and local farmers be encouraged to diversify their businesses to offer land for caravan and campsites or to provide holiday accommodation.

Reason for this Recommendation

There were very few campsites in the District that were supported by organisations such as The Caravan Club. These organisations provide support and marketing for camping and caravanning sites and would encourage tourists to visit rural areas in the District. To enhance the rural economy farmers could diversify their businesses to include tourist accommodation which could provide additional income to sustain their businesses for the future.

- e) That tourist information be made available at community libraries in rural areas in the District and be suitably promoted.

Reason for this Recommendation

As there were only three Tourist Information Centres in the District this would provide additional provision for providing local tourist information for minimal cost. This could be promoted by the District Council and enable tourists and local residents to access information in rural areas.

- f) To enable links with neighbouring local authorities and specialist organisations, such as the Chilterns Society, to promote walks and trails in and around adjoining districts.

Reason for this Recommendation

There were many walks and trails in and around the Wycombe District that crossed over into other district and county councils areas. This would help promote activities to tourists in other areas and encourage them to participate in events that they may not usually be aware of and this in turn would enhance tourism at a local level.

Background and Issues

1.2 The Rural Issues Task and Finish Group was set up by the Improvement and Review Commission on 13 January 2016 and the following Terms of Reference were subsequently agreed at the meeting on 19 May 2016:

- To suggest/identify measures that can be taken to improve/develop rural affordable housing and the rural economy including broadband provision.

The Group Membership was as follows:

Chairman: Councillor Carl Etholen

Vice-Chairman: Councillor Mark Harris

Membership:

Councillor Hugh McCarthy

Councillor Mrs Shade Adoh

Councillor John Savage

The following investigations were carried out by the Group:

Monday 18 April 2016

- Scoping Meeting

Thursday 19 May 2016

- Visit from with Nick Phillips, Chief Executive of Community Impact Bucks and member of The Buckinghamshire Rural Affairs Group (BRAG).

Tuesday 26 July 2016

- Visit from Heather Dean, Head of Skills and Business support, Buckinghamshire Business First.

Wednesday 5 October 2016

- Visit from WDC Planning Officer, WDC Housing Officer and WDC Tourism Officer.

Wednesday 9 November 2016

- Discussion and finalising of recommendations.

Conclusions/ Recommendations

The Group having taken evidence from external sources and WDC officers identified that superfast broadband, rural affordable housing and tourism were key elements for residents and businesses in the rural area.

The Council had invested in the Connect Counties project to enable superfast broadband to be available for everyone in the District. It was important that this project was monitored and effective for people in rural areas so that they were offered equal opportunities as residents and business in the towns.

As house prices were continuing to rise and becoming increasingly more difficult to access for some residents in rural areas it was apparent that rural housing was an important aspect in keeping local communities together. Local parish councils were an integral part of planning for future housing, and with regards to housing requirements in the new Local Plan, it was important to make sure rural parish councils were supported by the District.

Tourism was an integral aspect of the rural community and provided a large part of the rural economy. It was important that the Council help to promote and support rural businesses therefore sustaining the economy and future of rural communities.

Next Steps

To be referred to the Improvement & Review Commission on Wednesday 11 January 2017 for onward referral, with endorsement, amendment or rejection, to Cabinet on 2 February 2017.

Background Papers

Held in Democratic Services