

SOUTHERN RURAL COMMITTEE

25 November 2010

*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

AGENDA ITEM No.

6

TITLE OF REPORT: REVISED RURAL STRATEGY AND PARISH CHARTER FOR NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF POLICY, PARTNERSHIPS AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT.

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 The Council's existing Rural Strategy runs until the end of 2010. A revised draft Rural Strategy has been produced and was considered by Cabinet in July.

2. FORWARD PLAN

- 2.2 This report contains a recommendation on a key decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on the 1st May 2010.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The district's existing Rural Strategy is dated 2005-2010.. Revision is necessary to enable the document to reflect the Council's latest policy and financial position as well as taking full regard of other circumstances affecting our rural/parished areas which may have changed over the past five years.
- 3.2 The Parish Charter, a document which establishes the ground rules and manner in which the Council and other partners, such as Hertfordshire County Council, Highways etc interact and consult with parishes and vice versa, was originally due for review in 2009. The Parish and Town Councils' Conference in 2009 agreed that it should be considered alongside the Rural Strategy, aligning the two documents more closely than in the past.
- 3.3 On 27th July 2010 (minute 34) Cabinet considered a report on the proposed timeline and progress with the development of a revised rural strategy and revised parish charter for the district.
- 3.4 The Rural Strategy seeks to identify the issues that are important to our rural areas and the ways in which they can be addressed. Some of the actions are for the District Council and the parishes themselves to take forward, but others are for the partner agencies such as Hertfordshire County Council, Hertfordshire Constabulary, Countryside Management Service and the National Health Service.

3.5 The Parish Charter largely describes how the District and Parish Councils can work together, setting out a framework to include arrangements for formal consultation, communications etc. Discussion with partners has concluded that the Parish Charter should feature as an appendix to the revised Rural Strategy.

3.6 In 2009 (30 March 2009, minute point 80) the three area committees with rural and parished areas considered progress with the 2005 strategy.

4. REVISION OF THE NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE RURAL STRATEGY AND PARISH CHARTER

4.1 The first iteration of the rural strategy took place in 2005 and on review of progress in 2008/09 it was found that, whilst a significant number of the original actions had been completed, additional actions had been added following ongoing discussion with external agencies. Not all actions aligned with agreed Council policy at that time or had had specific resources and timescales allocated to them, which has prevented or prolonged their effective implementation. There is a need therefore in this revision to start afresh in terms of agreeing a schedule of actions to ensure all partners have the resources and will to take them forward to completion. We also have to consider the additional implications regarding reduced or withdrawn funding streams from central Government, and the effect they will have not only on the Council's own resources and capacity, but also that of our partners.

4.2 An outline document to commence discussions was produced for the Parish and Town Councils' Conference in June 2010 and any parish and town council that were not present on this occasion were sent copies. This began the formal public consultation process and saw the creation of a 'Rural Strategy Working Group'. The working group comprises parish representatives, a representative from North Hertfordshire College and the NHDC portfolio holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs, as well as North Hertfordshire District Council officers.

4.3 **Appendix 1** to this report sets out the draft Rural Strategy and **Appendix 2** the draft Parish Charter. North Hertfordshire District Council in partnership with the Rural Strategy working group seek the opinion of those at this Committee.

4.4 The final strategy document, which will include an introduction by the portfolio holder for community engagement and rural affairs, has been shaped by the working group. It will also include relevant data about our parished areas, national and local context with regard to existing and future service delivery in three tier areas, funding challenges and opportunities, as well as links to other strategic plans and activities agreed by the council and its partners.

4.5 Parish Charter

The Parish Charter describes how the District Council, County Councils and Parish Councils can work together. So far there have been few suggestions for significant change.

- 4.6 Some parish representatives have already expressed concerns about new arrangements for considering planning applications, which were approved in the Constitutional Review put before Annual Council on 30th May. There is a feeling in some parishes that this breaks down the former, well-regarded dialogue which existed for parishes in the previous planning decision making process. The opportunity to discuss these changes was the subject of a workshop at the Parish and Town Council Conference on 28th June, and officers have undertaken to review the effectiveness of these new arrangements, taking on board all comments from the parishes. The outcome of that review will inform future arrangements within the Council's Constitution and the decision making process as currently described in the Parish Charter.

4.7 Issues

Whilst the council formerly had a single annual opportunity to engage with our rural partners (the Town and Parish Councils' Conference), a number of our regular parish contacts expressed concern there was insufficient opportunity to get parish representatives together more regularly and feed outcomes into other relevant activities or documents. Community development and partnership officers have therefore facilitated a 'closed' network meeting, i.e. the agenda and discussions are chosen and delivered by the parish representatives themselves, twice per annum. The cost of the hall hire, £35.00 per evening, is borne by the Community Development Team, and the parishes themselves provide refreshments and administrative support for the meeting. This was first convened in the Mrs Howard Community Hall, Letchworth, in January 2010 and then on 25th October 2010. This also gives the Council and partners an additional opportunity for discussion of content for strategic documents and plans, the Rural Strategy included, as well as any changes to services by the Council, such as waste or recycling.

- 4.8 The timeline for the development of the strategy has therefore been:

Launch of draft action plan consultation based on 2005 strategy	Town and Parish Councils' Conference	28 th June
Meetings with working group commence	Portfolio holder PP&CD officers Parish representatives	16 th July 14 th October
Consultation closes	Responses to PP&CD	30 th September
Parish Network Meeting have opportunity to discuss revised document, with consultation issues included	All town and parish councils for the district	25 th October
Draft Rural Strategy and Parish Charter presented to Royston, Baldock and Southern Rural Committees	Committee representatives	15 th November 25 th November 1 st December
Final document submitted to Cabinet for sign off	Cabinet	7 th December 2010

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Under its terms of reference Cabinet has the power to prepare and agree to implement policies and strategies other than those reserved to Council. Cabinet is also tasked with carrying out the Authority's responsibilities for improving the economic, social and environmental well-being of the District and increasing the availability of and equality of access to employment. Finally Cabinet may also promote and develop external partnerships to meet agreed Council priorities.
- 5.2 The various powers and duties bestowed on the District Council, Parish Councils and the County Council were considered throughout the drafting stages. These powers and duties are contained within a number of different pieces of legislation, for example the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

6. FINANCIAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Activities incorporated into the new Rural Strategy are subject to review under the existing Corporate Business Planning process. It is intended that the document should comprise the general principles of supportive working with town and parish councils, taking full regard of the ability of relevant partners to resource individual improvements and activities and should therefore not be viewed solely as a Council owned document.
- 6.2 In the light of uncertainty regarding the detailed outcomes from the Comprehensive Spending Review and how that may impact the resources available not only to the parish and town councils, County Council, statutory/voluntary partners but also to the District Council, it will be important to maintain a regular review of finance and risk implications throughout the development and delivery of the rural strategy document.

7. HUMAN RESOURCE AND EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Delivery of actions arising from the new Rural Strategy will need to be incorporated into relevant service plans and personal work programmes of officers in those services, as discussion took place throughout the development of the plan with Heads of Service regarding capacity to deliver. In the event of further structural or resource changes arising from the current or evolving budget position, then individual commitments by services to deliver activity in this strategy would need to be reviewed again carefully.
- 7.2 The NHDC representatives on the working party are required to demonstrate they have considered any equalities impacts throughout the drafting of the new rural strategy and parish charter.

8. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

- 8.1 The 2009 Parish and Town Councils' Conference requested that the 2010 Conference be involved as the draft rural strategy was being developed.
- 8.2 The outline strategy was taken to the Parish and Town Councils' Conference on Monday 28th June 2010. The 2010 Conference was attended by 53 people including 24 representatives from parishes and town councils. As previously mentioned, this saw the establishment of the working group.

8.3 The outline strategy has been sent to all the parish councils that were unable to attend the conference. Initial comments on the outline document have been invited from all councils. The following organisations have also been consulted for their input into the revised Rural Strategy and Parish Charter:

- Hertfordshire County Council
- Age UK
- Countryside Management Service
- Hertfordshire Constabulary
- PCT
- Parish and Town Councils
- North Hertfordshire College
- North Hertfordshire CVS
- CDA for Hertfordshire
- Pro-Action
- HAPTC

8.4 The working party prepared a consultation draft and invited submissions until the end of September 2010.

8.5 Following discussions with parish representatives in at the Parish Councils' Networking meeting on 25th October 2010 it was proposed that a report will be submitted to the NHDC Cabinet meeting planned for 7th December 2010.

8.6 The views of these organisations have ensured that the documents are as accurate and up to date as possible. Amendments to the original key actions as well as suggestions for new key actions have been included.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 That the Area Committee consider the draft Rural Strategy and draft Parish Charter and refer any comments on it to North Hertfordshire District Council's Policy Team for review.

10. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 The recommendation(s) contained within paragraph 8 are made in order to facilitate effective consultation with the parish councils, relevant agencies and rural communities as a whole in developing a rural strategy for North Hertfordshire.

10.2 A much shorter consultation period would run risks including the lack of agreement by some of the partners who would have to help deliver the strategy and lack of engagement by some colleagues in the parish councils. In order to ensure that any Action Plan resulting from the draft Rural Strategy and the accuracy of the draft Parish Charter is informed by as much local knowledge as possible.

11. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - Draft Rural Strategy
Appendix 2 - Draft Parish Charter

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13. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 13.1 None.