

Swale Rural Forum – the Way Forward

Discussion Paper following the Workshop held at the Meeting on 29 July 2008

1 Scope

Sheils Flynn was commissioned to facilitate a workshop at the Swale Rural Forum meeting held on 29 July 2008. The workshop aimed to discuss and agree a more up to date set of Terms of Reference, which tie in with all relevant projects and proposals in Swale and which emphasise the key issues and challenges in rural Swale.

This draft Discussion Paper reviews the remit, purpose and working methods of the Rural Forum. It suggests where changes might be made to reflect the range of opinion expressed by Forum members at the workshop and is intended to provide a basis for further debate, both via consultation on the draft paper and at the next meeting of the Forum on 16 December.

The Discussion Paper is divided into three sections:

- the remit & purpose of the Forum
- its structure & working methods
- conclusions & recommendations

2 Remit and purpose of the Forum

2.1 Terms of Reference

Swale is a predominantly rural borough and it is appropriate that there is a Rural Forum to address and respond to rural issues and challenges as they arise. The Rural Forum is also seen as a counterbalance to the more 'urban' focus of the ongoing major regeneration projects in Sittingbourne, Queenborough & Rushenden, Sheerness and Faversham.

The Forum is established by Swale Borough Council and its members include elected Members, Borough Council officers, representatives from Kent County Council, the Association of Parish Councils and a wide range of relevant regional and local organisations. Meetings are open to members of the public.

The current Terms of Reference of the Swale Rural Forum are set out in the box below.

Swale Rural Forum - Current Terms of Reference

1. To provide an appropriate forum for public participation and consultation on matters relating to their area
2. To consider and champion the needs of rural communities and businesses within the context of:
 - i. The policies and services of statutory and non-statutory agencies operating within or on behalf of Swale.
 - ii. Community and economic regeneration activity impacting upon Swale.
3. To "rural proof" relevant policy documents and statements made at a local, County, regional and national level and, where appropriate, respond to them.
4. To identify issues impacting upon relevant communities and organisations and seek their views about those issues.

- | |
|--|
| <p>5. To draw together, through partnership working, existing available resources to pursue projects to the benefit of rural communities, businesses and other organizations.</p> <p>6. To identify, promote and obtain external funding (including LEADER+) and forms of support available to rural communities, businesses and organisations and to support projects to the benefit of rural communities and businesses.</p> |
|--|

This is a wide remit, which focuses on identifying and addressing the needs of rural communities, providing representation (in relation to rural issues) at borough, regional and national level and identifying opportunities for projects which will benefit rural communities through partnership working and funding.

Since the Forum is led by the Borough Council, it is also relevant to consider the priorities set out in Swale's Corporate Plan¹.

Swale Borough Council Priorities
Regenerating Swale
Creating a Cleaner & Greener Swale
Promoting a Safer & Stronger Community
Becoming a High Performing Organisation

The Terms of Reference provide an overarching framework for action, without dictating specific fields of interest or types of activity.

The next three sub-sections review the points made about the remit and focus of the Forum's activities during the workshop discussion, the work/activities actually undertaken by the Forum during the past 3 years and the relationship between the Forum and other organisations/committees.

2.2 Remit and focus of the Forum's activities - Workshop discussion

Key points from the workshop and (August 2007 briefing paper²) relating to the remit and focus of the Rural Forum were:

- **Maintain a balance between environmental, social and economic issues** – there are strong inter-relationships between all these themes as a high quality environment is a catalyst for socio-economic growth. Key relevant sub-themes for rural Swale are:
 - tourism
 - public transport
 - housing
 - rural facilities (schools, post offices, village shops, childcare, pubs)
 - community assets – eg church buildings
- **More emphasis on representing rural communities, rather than commenting on projects** – some members of the Forum felt that there was too much emphasis on projects and not enough focus on building a meaningful dialogue with parish councils. There is insufficient time in the Forum meetings to comment on projects or monitor their progress in any detail – only possible to receive brief updates

¹ Swale Borough Council, *Shaping the Future of Swale: Corporate Plan 200 –2011*

² Swale Rural Forum, August 9 2007 (Paper for agenda item) Developing the Swale Rural Forum

- **Focus on the links between regeneration projects and the impacts on rural communities** – this is a key part of the terms of reference for the Rural Forum and was part of the rationale for its establishment in the first place.
- **Have some mechanism for keeping track of all the ongoing projects** – not just a series of presentations on new projects. There is a need to monitor sustainability and the inter-relationships between all of the projects
- **What is ‘rural’ – ie what about rural fringe issues?** These are relevant in terms of environmental impacts.
- **Place particular emphasis on the priorities set out in Swale’s Corporate Plan** – ie learning and skills, environment (clean & green), high quality economic growth, effective communication with local communities, a distinctive sense of place (cultural offer & heightened sense of well being), affordable housing, public transport and the health agenda.

The workshop discussion suggested that members of the Forum supported the full range of types of activity described in the Terms of Reference. However there was some debate over the degree to which the public could be involved in the work of the Forum in a meaningful way and this topic is picked up in Sections 2.4 and 3 below.

2.3 Work/activities undertaken by the Forum since December 2005

Having reviewed the points made at the meeting and in briefing papers, it also seems relevant to review the actual work undertaken in recent years. The following list of topics is taken from a review of minutes of Rural Forum meetings between December 2005 and July 2008. The full list of topics (by year) is summarised in Annex A.

The table below re-orders the list of activities by relating them to different types of work - the aim is to show the breakdown of activities in relation to the broad categories of the Terms of Reference.

<p>1. Provide a forum for public participation & consultation on local matters No examples of this type of activity</p>
<p>2. Champion needs of rural communities & businesses within the context of policies/services & economic regeneration activities Affordable housing – presentation of housing needs survey report & response to questions Rural archaeology – presentation & response to questions Poly-tunnels & reservoirs (horticulture) – presentation & response to questions Kent Downs AONB – presentation & response to questions Gypsy & Traveller Unit – presentation by KCC & response to questions Effect of the second homes discount on rural tourism – presentation & policy updates Shoreline Management Plan – presentation & regular policy/consultation updates Rural Commission – report from conference Rural accessibility & community transport – presentation & response to questions Quiet lanes project – presentation & response to questions GGKM presentation & response to questions LGA Rural Commission – policy update Swale Biodiversity Action Plan - update English Rural Housing Association – presentation & response to questions Biodiversity Action Plan – presentation & response to questions Swale Green Grid Strategy – presentation & response to questions Nottingham Declaration on climate change – policy update</p>

<p>3. Rural proof & respond to rural policy documents</p> <p>Working Group – report on economic development strategy & rural action plan Rural Social & Community Programme – Working Group response to DEFRA consultation DEFRA consultation on Rural Development Programme – Working Group response Community Call for Action – consultation; co-ordinated response from Rural Forum DEFRA consultation on Coastal access – Rural Forum response</p>
<p>4. Identify issues impacting on relevant communities & organisations & seek their views about those issues</p> <p>Concern over post bus and post office closures Payment of school paper recycling credits</p>
<p>5. Draw together existing available resources to pursue projects to the benefit of rural communities</p> <p>Explore & develop farmers markets in Swale</p>
<p>6. Promote & obtain external funding to support projects to benefit rural communities</p> <p>Future of the National Fruit Collections at Brogdale – support for SBC tender submission to DEFRA Rural Development Programme – LEADER funding bid – call for working group to inform the process GGKM presentation & response to questions Update on bids for Parklands funding Update on bids for LEADER funding</p>

This is an imperfect analysis as there is obviously overlap between categories and some activities could be placed under several headings. But it does provide a useful overview and suggests that the Forum spends the majority of its time receiving and responding to information relating to rural policy or projects (item 2 of the Terms of Reference). The minutes provide no evidence that the Forum has provided a forum for public consultation and participation and suggest that there has been little identification of issues impacting on rural communities and related consultation (item 4).

2.4 Relationship between the Forum and other organisations/committees

It seems relevant to consider whether there is any duplication between the work of the Rural Forum and that of the Swale Countryside Forum and/or Swale's Green Grid Partnership.

Key points of similarity/difference are noted in the table overleaf.

	Rural Forum	Countryside Forum	GG Partnership
Membership	SBC Officers, members, stakeholder representatives & members of the public	Open to all residents of Swale	SBC Officers and stakeholder representatives – not open to the public
Remit	<p>Champion needs of rural communities & businesses in relation to policies, services and regeneration activities.</p> <p>Identify issues impacting on relevant communities and consult on those issues</p> <p>Provide a forum for public participation & consultation</p> <p>Identify, promote and co-ordinate projects and funding to the benefit of rural communities & businesses</p>	<p>Promote communication (education and the exchange of information) about wildlife & rural matters & participate in projects to preserve & enhance Swale's wildlife</p> <p>Aims to respond to the needs of its members and the community</p>	<p>Direct the development of environmental & regeneration policies, strategies & projects so that environmental principles underpin all aspects of regeneration, growth & service delivery across Swale</p> <p>Focus is developing & implementing Swale's Green Grid – proofing relevant policies, co-ordinating partnerships, identifying funding opportunities & preparing bids/project applications</p>
Reports to:		Stand alone organisation – works in partnership with like-minded groups	Swale LSP & other committees as required
No meetings per annum	3-4	4	4

Areas of potential duplication are:

- **environmental policies & projects** – the Green Grid Partnership is tasked with developing, co-ordinating and monitoring environmental projects and policies in Swale – yet the Rural Forum also covers this field of activity
- **identifying & responding to issues of concern to rural communities & businesses** – both the Rural Forum and the Countryside Forum seek to do this, although the workshop discussion suggested that the Countryside Forum was more successful in developing and maintaining a meaningful dialogue with members of the public.

3 Structure & working methods of the Rural Forum

The workshop discussion generated a number of concerns about the way the Rural Forum operates and ideas for revised working methods:

- **Working with parish councils** – parish councils currently have limited awareness of the work of the Rural Forum – the parish clerks receive the agendas, but there is no sense that the Forum is available as a resource or a place where they can voice concerns raised by local rural communities - the Forum should have greater confidence in parish councils and develop a closer working relationship with them

- **Formality & reporting** – the Forum was criticised for being too formal and inflexible; there were calls for a less rigid approach and sufficient flexibility to adjust the agenda to address issues as they arise (during the meetings if necessary).
- **Structure of the Forum** – there was general agreement that it is necessary to split into smaller working groups to undertake specific projects or responses to consultation etc. There was some discussion at the workshop as to whether it would be worth having geographically specific working groups or whether it is best to split into working groups to address specific themes as and when the need arises.
- **Degree of public participation** – how much public participation is appropriate and are the Rural Forum meetings the best venue for this? The Countryside Forum was generally felt to be more successful as a forum for public participation (than the Rural Forum), probably because it has a more open, flexible structure. A comparison was also drawn with PACTS, which are well attended by members of the public and provide a good venue for open discussion. One member of the Forum commented that PACTS tend to deal with 'hot topics' and local issues, but generate relatively little action.

4 Conclusions & recommendations

The following recommendations reflect the workshop discussion and subsequent analysis. They are intended as a catalyst for further debate:

4.1 Purpose & remit

The Rural Forum's Terms of Reference reflect the views of members. However, there is a need to focus on the way different types of users (Members, Council officers, stakeholders, parish councils, members of the public) can benefit. It seems that the Forum has the potential to improve the way it functions as a source of information and expert advice and as a mechanism for formal, strategic action in relation to policy, projects, funding and partnership working. Possible actions are:

- **clarify the distinctions between the work of the Rural Forum, the Countryside Forum and the Green Grid Partnership.** There is some potential for duplication, but this could be resolved by:
 - maintaining an overview of environmental projects/policies, leaving the Green Grid Partnership to deal with detailed monitoring and delivery
 - encouraging a relatively formal, strategic approach to public consultation and liaising with the Countryside Forum and parish councils to identification issues of public relevance & concern
- **develop a mechanism for keeping Forum members up to date with the range of relevant policy initiatives and projects in Swale** which can be updated on an ongoing basis and which is accessible to parish councils and other organisations (via the Borough Council's website). This might be a table listing the hierarchy of policies, projects and funding bids, with a brief description, timetable/milestones and contact details.
- **provide a mechanism for Members to nominate topics of interest** on which they require further information, or which they would like to see discussed at the Forum – this is linked to the development of a more flexible agenda (see below)
- **publish lists of topics discussed by the Forum** (past topics and those on the agenda) under the headings of the priorities in Swale's Corporate Plan so there is an ongoing check on the relationship between the work of the Forum and the Borough Council's priorities, as well as a source of information for all. The topics can be described briefly, but it would be useful if they were linked to downloads

- **arrange case studies and visits** to experience and understand best practice elsewhere

4.2 Representing rural communities

The Rural Forum should retain its strategic, 'expert' role. It is a relatively formal group, which is less suited to public participation than other meetings such as parish council, PACTs or the Countryside Forum. However the Rural Forum needs to improve the way it works with these more accessible groups, so that it has a valid role in the hierarchy and gains a reputation as a source of relevant information and as a means of providing effective action on relevant rural issues as and when they are raised by other groups. Possible actions are:

- **circulate some form of briefing paper** to parish councils, PACTs and all other relevant agencies and organisations to re-launch the work of the Rural Forum and make other organisations aware of its role and the way they can benefit from its work
- **undertake a simple survey** to identify key issues for rural parishes in Swale, using this as an opportunity to brief parish councils on the role of the Rural Forum and its potential to address local concerns.
- **develop a more flexible agenda**, with opportunities for parish councils to contribute and add relevant items for discussion. These could be grouped shortly before the meeting so as to identify and so that the Forum could address common themes
- **advertise key topics for discussion at the Rural Forum well in advance** so the parish councils have an opportunity to consider them as part of the agenda for their local meetings, raising comments as necessary.
- **remove public participation altogether** - redirect members of the public to parish councils etc who can then feed into the Rural Forum.

4.3 Possible changes to the Forum's current Terms of Reference

In general the Terms of Reference seem appropriate, but if Members decide to remove public participation, item 1 could be deleted since indirect methods of representing rural communities are covered adequately under the other headings

This Discussion Paper is intended as a catalyst for further debate on these issues.

Annex A

Activities undertaken & topics discussed by Swale's Rural Forum Dec 05 - July 08

Year	Overall theme/type of work	Topics discussed
2005	Briefing/information - general Contribution to rural policy (borough) Contribution to rural policy (national) Local issue raised by member	Rural archaeology - presentation Working Group – report on economic development strategy & rural action plan Rural Social & Community Programme – Working Group response to DEFRA consultation Concern over post bus and post office closures
2006	Briefing/information re policy Briefing/information re policy Briefing/information re projects Contribution to rural policy (national) Briefing/information re policy Briefing/information re policy Briefing/information re policy Briefing/information re policy (national) Local issue raised by member Briefing/information re policy Briefing/information re local project Briefing/information re policy Discussion topic raised by SBC officer Briefing/information re policy	Affordable housing – presentation of housing needs survey report & response to questions Poly-tunnels & reservoirs (horticulture) – presentation & response to questions Kent Downs AONB - presentation DEFRA consultation on Rural Development Programme – Working Group response Gypsy & traveller Unit – presentation by KCC Effect of the second homes discount on rural tourism - presentation Shoreline Management Plan - presentation Rural Commission – report from conference Payment of school paper recycling credits Rural accessibility & community transport - presentation Quiet lanes project - presentation Effect of the second homes discount on rural tourism – policy update Farmers markets in Swale Shoreline Management Plan – policy update
2007	Briefing/information re policy Rural policy (borough) Support for SBC tender submission Briefing/information re policy Briefing/information re local project Briefing/information re policy Contribution to rural policy (national) Support for Regional funding bid	Shoreline Management Plan – policy update Community Call for Action – consultation; co-ordinated response from Rural Forum Future of the National Fruit Collections at Brogdale – support for SBC tender submission to DEFRA Effect of the second homes discount on rural tourism – policy update Farmer's Market on Sheppey – progress update Shoreline Management Plan – policy update DEFRA consultation on Coastal access – Rural Forum response Rural Development Programme – LEADER funding bid – call for working group to inform the process
2008	Briefing/information re funding bid Briefing/information re policy/ funding bids Briefing/information re policy Briefing/information re funding bid Briefing/information re local project Briefing/information - general Briefing/information re funding bid	Future of the National Fruit Collections at Brogdale – update on bid success GGKM presentation & response to questions LGA Rural Commission – policy update Update on bids for LEADER funding from Kent – including input from Rural Forum Working Group Swale Biodiversity Action Plan - update English Rural Housing Association - presentation Update on bids for LEADER funding (no working

Briefing/information re local project	group action) Biodiversity Action Plan – presentation & response to questions
Briefing/information re local project	Swale Green Grid Strategy – presentation & response to questions
Briefing/information re policy	Nottingham Declaration on climate change – policy update
Briefing/information re funding bid	Update on bids for Parklands funding
Briefing/information re funding bid	Update on bids for LEADER funding