

Swale Rural Forum Sub-group

Background and Introduction

At the Swale Rural Forum on December 16th 2008 it was agreed that a sub-group would be set up to consider the Sheils Flynn report "Swale Rural Forum – a Way Forward" which arose from the discussion at the Swale Rural Forum on 29th July 2008. The minutes from the Swale Rural Forum on 16th December show that the following were nominated to be part of this group: Councillors Ben Stokes, Cindy Davis and Monique Bonney, representatives from the National Farmers' Union and Kent Association of Local Councils, Lyn Newton (SBC) and Frances Wallis (SBC).

This report results from the two sub-group meetings held in January and February 2009, attended by Cllr Stokes, Cllr Davis, Kevin Attwood (NFU), Lyn Newton and Frances Wallis, as well as Kellie MacKenzie from Democratic Services. It was decided that an action plan (attached) should be produced and used as a framework at each Swale Rural Forum meeting.

Aim

The intention of this report and action plan is to ensure that the Swale Rural Forum maintains its focus on rural affairs and better engages the local communities, and relevant organisations which might add value to the rural agenda.

Key Issues and Challenges

An issue which was raised at the original workshop held in July 2008 was that members of the Swale Rural Forum, and the Parish Councils in particular, were not receiving agendas etc. in good time, or even at all. It has since been clarified with Democratic Services that agendas are sent out well before the meeting. It is therefore essential that the Swale Rural Forum commits to improving engagement with the Parish Councils and other members of the Forum. At present, only the Borough Council is invited to submit items to the agenda, however if the Forum is to maintain a dialogue with other groups, they need to have an input into the meetings, by shaping the agendas.

This issue seems to be supported by the Sheils Flynn report which states that Parish Councils have limited awareness of the Swale Rural Forum. They meet more often than the Forum so are better placed to discuss local issues which may need to be brought forward. Some also have greater contact with the PACT (Partners and Communities Together) meetings, which do have rural issues arising. At present there is no link between the PACTs and the Forum so it is important that a mechanism is established to co-ordinate rural issues coming out of the PACTs, and bring them forward to the Forum to promote or guide actions. The Swale Rural Forum needs to be more flexible to allow greater input from other groups.

The National Farmers' Union welcomes the fact that the Swale Rural Forum is trying to engage with a wider audience, however there is a level of uncertainty and caution about how and in what form this dialogue takes place. Some groups may feel more comfortable in PACT or Parish Councils meetings, and any points raised can be relayed back to the Forum.

To increase awareness of the Swale Rural Forum it was suggested that the Swale Borough Council website could be better utilised. Some Parish Councils have their own websites so the Swale Rural Forum needs to have a piece on them saying who they are, what their remit it is, and how to contact the Forum, or bring an item forward for discussion. It is also proposed that a business card/postcard be produced which Parish and Borough Councillors and all other Forum members can distribute to their local village shops, pubs etc. This again will help engage the wider community.

Any work which the Swale Rural Forum does needs to link up with Swale Borough Council's Corporate Plan and its Priorities.

In Swale there is great emphasis on regeneration at present. The Forum therefore needs to focus on the links between regeneration projects and their impacts on the rural community. This may include inviting a planning representative where appropriate to discuss issues of mutual interest.

With regard to the Terms of Reference, it was suggested that there should be a change in the wording of the second point, to include the word 'environmental' so that it reads "Community, economic and environmental regeneration activity impacting upon Swale".

Cllr Ben Stokes
Chair of the Swale Rural Forum