

Rural Commission & Conference

This year's Rural Commission and Conference was held in Cambridge on 8th and 9th September. Swale Borough Council was represented by Councillors' Bowles and Henderson. In addition Frances Wallis attended on the Wednesday (Annual Conference). As the national Chairman of the Rural Commission I again chaired the two days. Following group meeting the first day started with 'house keeping' Item. This included the Confirmation of Office Holders – Chairman and three vice-chairman. This year we have new VC from the Labour and Lib/Dem Groups as their predecessors lost their seats in June.

The first Plenary Session was addressed by Dan Norris MP the Parliamentary Under Secretary Rural Affairs at DEFRA. Fairly new in the Role Mr Norris read a prepared speech and took questions. He highlighted Government plans for 112,000 new houses for rent or shared ownership. He also discussed Rural Broadband, emphasising problems of access, speed and cost. The second Speaker was Trevor Cherrett Head of Planning, Housing and Transport at the Commission for Rural Communities. He stood in at short notice when Lib/Dem MP Matthew Taylor had to withdraw due to family illness. He advocated 'going local', devolved decision making and producing Parish Plans. Mr Cherrett said the idea that Rural Settlements were unsustainable and therefore that all development should take place in towns was wrong.

The first afternoon speaker was Stewart Jackson MP the Shadow Minister for Communities and Local Government. In a very political presentation he attacked the present Government for having little understanding of the Countryside. He evidenced loss of shops, post offices, Schools, Rural Police Stations etc. He said rural poverty is hidden. Countryside must not become a museum or dormitory. Affordable housing is needed. LA's must be able to capture gains from new housing. A Conservative Government would return power to Local Authorities. They would also allow village expansion if a Parish wished it. They would encourage Local Land Trusts. Regional Spatial Strategy would be abolished in week 1. L.D.F's would be simplified to reduce delay.

The fourth session was on Older People and Rural Exclusion. Speakers from Social Exclusion Task Force in Cabinet Office and Age Concern Northumberland.

There followed a selection of workshops. I attended session on Community Infrastructure Levy which I still find confusing. We reassembled for a 'Cambridge Union' style debate on the subject of food production verses diversification. Following a well argued debate from both platform and floor the delegates surprised themselves by supporting diversification. In most cases swayed by the arguments put forward.

This was followed by a visit to a famous Pacing Stud at Newmarket for a reception hosted by Cambridgeshire County Council and East Cambridgeshire District Council.

The Annual Conference on the Wednesday started with a session on Rural Broadband. The following session was on Local Energy Generation followed by the role of Food Policy Advisors.

There were then 4 workshops repeated before and after lunch. I sat in on a very interesting session on Rural Road Safety in the morning and in the afternoon took part in a workshop on the Impact of Planning on Flooding.

The final Plenary Speaker was Sarah McAdam, the new Chief Executive for the Commission for Rural Communities. She explained that she saw the CRC's roles as:

Rural Advocate to Government

Expert Advisor to Government

Independent Watchdog to Government

Publishing good practice case studies and the effect of Public Spending Costs on Rural Areas

The CRC are currently undertaking research into Recession Reporting in Rural Areas and also into the importance of small and micro Businesses in the Rural Economy.

Almost all presentations are available at length on L.G.A. website