

# POLICY REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT PANEL

## 25 FEBRUARY 2013

*Present :-* Councillor Julie Young (Chairman)  
Councillors Mark Cable, Nigel Chapman, Barrie Cook,  
Mark Cory and Jo Hayes

*Substitute Member :-* Councillor Richard Martin  
for Councillor Margaret Fairley-Crowe

### 24. Minutes

The minutes of the meetings of the Panel held on 14 January 2013 were confirmed as a correct record.

### 25. Rural Related Issues

**Councillor Chapman (in respect of his Board Membership of Colchester Borough Homes) declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(5).**

Lucie Breadman, Head of Life Opportunities, presented a report addressing the rural related issues theme so far as it impacted upon the following:

- Broadband
- Transport
- Isolation issues for younger and older people
- Provision of suitable homes for villagers to move into when their families move on and/or as they get less mobile
- More encouragement for the use of redundant farm buildings for small business use

The provision of rural broadband was becoming increasingly important to engage residents and build resilient communities, whilst impacting on business competitiveness, home working and healthcare services and monitoring. It was explained that Essex County Council was leading the Superfast Essex Broadband Project which aimed to provide universal access to internet speeds of 2Mbps by 2015 and of 8Mbps by 2018. The Colchester Digital Strategy also aimed to significantly accelerate the delivery of high speed digital infrastructure in the borough bringing together Council assets, not funding, with private sector investment. In rural areas the Council was also working with County Broadband to support and enable their building of a core network in parishes across North East Essex.

The report went on to refer to the benefits of rural living such as peace and tranquility, access to the countryside, sense of local community which needed to be balanced against access to services which were not provided or were disappearing from rural areas. A major problem for those living in the rural areas was isolation and access to essential services, especially for those who did not drive (the young, the old, those with

disabilities). Rural areas struggled to retain facilities meaning that travel was needed for food, health care, work and education. The provision of local shops and services was highlighted as a priority in many parish plans whilst internet deliveries could help overcome food shopping but provided little help with accessing health and education. The Essex County Council Local Transport Plan priorities for the rural areas of Essex included:

- Supporting the economy of our historic towns and villages, extensive coastline and varied countryside;
- Supporting transport to ensure that access is provided to employment, education, healthcare and food shopping;
- Ensuring that people are able to access important services (including shopping, healthcare, library facilities, etc.), without needing to travel long distances; and
- Minimising the impact transport has on the local character.

Colchester's Youth Strategy Group (YSG) had been set up in 2012 as the borough's consultative body to make recommendations on youth provision in the area. The YSG had agreed the following actions:

- A website to be developed by young people where they can access information on activities and events
- Volunteer youth work recruitment drive where volunteers will be trained and CRB checked to deliver youth activities across the borough especially in the rural areas
- Business in the Community will be approached in order to discuss the possibility of developing a community transport scheme for young people that would be accessible and affordable

Social isolation had been identified as one of the main issues for older people; an issue that was more evident for residents in rural areas as limited access to transport prevented them from accessing social, befriending and other activities. The CCVS community bus provided excursions, special bookings for hospital appointments and other journeys. The scheme was also working with a GP surgery to enable more residents to access their services. IT and other technology was also a challenge for some older people with many lacking the confidence to participate in on-line banking, send email or surf the web. Evidence from Age UK suggested that physical ailments, frailty and feeling vulnerable made social outings time consuming and filled people with anxiety. When feeling vulnerable many people prefer support from someone they know and trust such as a family member or close neighbour which limited support networks and turned family members into carers.

The report went on to explain that the Adopted Council policy directed the majority of new development to the urban area of Colchester and restricted growth in rural areas. Consequently the overall supply of housing in rural areas was limited and constrained options for those wishing to downsize in the same village. Policy options on this issue could usefully be considered through the process of adopting a Neighbourhood Plan, given that these were intended to allow local communities to adopt specific policies to meet local needs. The Council had a clear role in making provision for affordable housing for those in housing need, but it had a much more limited role in providing assistance to those already within the open housing market including elderly owner

occupiers. In rural areas, the focus has been on adding to the supply of affordable units through the policy of exception sites. It was intended to review the rural exception policies in the light of new national policy to permit greater flexibility to account for local needs while retaining the principle of targeting preferential housing assistance to those in greatest need.

As with rural housing, policy within the National Planning Policy Framework introduced greater levels of flexibility on employment development in the countryside. The Council would be reviewing its policies to ensure they complied with national guidance and policy for rural employment has been highlighted as a particular area for consideration. In addition, further flexibility for former agricultural buildings was contained in a recent government announcement that in order to help promote rural prosperity and job creation, agricultural buildings would be able to be converted to a range of other uses, but excluding residential dwellings.

Lucie Breadman, assisted by Nigel Myers, Enterprise and Tourism Manager, Paul Wilkinson, Transportation Policy Manager, Bridget Tighe, Community Initiatives Manager and Laura Chase, Planning Policy Manager responded to questions and discussion on the following issues:

- The issue of access to local hospitals and doctors surgeries from rural and urban communities which tended to be reliant on voluntary sector schemes or taxis and the need for greater innovation to address an increasingly difficult issue;
- The possibility of revisiting previous community transport initiatives such as a hopper bus service and the importance of securing regular passenger numbers to maintain viability

The Chairman invited each of the guests in turn to address the Panel on the issues from their organisation's perspective.

Lloyd Felton presented details of the work of County Broadband to build a core broadband network in parishes across North East Essex. The network build had been completed in West Bergholt and was now being actively marketed ranging from a free community inclusion data plan of 1Mbps up to 64Mbps with Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP). Market penetration in West Bergholt was currently in excess of 10%. In addition a build and revenue share proposal had been presented to Abberton, Langenhoe and Winstred Parish Councils for their consideration. Grant funding from the Abberton Reservoir Fund has been applied for by these Parish Councils and deployment plans were also being actively developed in other parishes. A partnership had been developed with the Diocese of Chelmsford in order to gain access to local churches to act as the 'points of presence' in the villages.

Mr Felton responded to a number of questions from members of the Panel, in particular in relation to:

- The different ways in which Parishes were able to engage with County Broadband;
- The impact of the Essex County Council initiative and the potential for confusion to be created in terms of the company branding, the choice of solutions available and the impact of the choice on the viability of the solutions;

- The potential for new ideas to be explored in order to assist in the improvement of broadband speeds in rural communities, such as the innovative use of Section 106 funding;
- The need for 'points of presence' to be created in order to connect to the internet using the cheaper selection of frequencies

Nick Shuttleworth outlined the work of the Rural Community Council for Essex to the Panel. It had been established in 1929 but its focus now was to help people in communities build a sustainable future. The organisation acted as a representative voice but it was also facilitating and giving practical support and advice. He referred to five issues in particular, namely:

- Every community was different - RCCE provided support to help communities identify their choices in terms of community led planning and neighbourhood planning;
- Affordable housing – without which young people would be lost to local communities;
- Homes for downsizers – looking to help with survey work to accommodate changes;
- Accessing services to counter rural isolation with a pilot scheme called Village Agents which had arranged for 10,000 referrals over a three year period. The scheme provided one to one support to identify issues for clients such as benefits entitlements or access to local clubs and to arrange for referral to the appropriate agency;
- Village Halls – 85% of villages had access to a hall which could be used to a greater and wider extent. RCCE were working with local communities such as Messing and Great Horkeley to improve and redevelopment their facilities

Mr Shuttleworth responded to a number of questions from members of the Panel, in particular in relation to:

- The extension of the concept of Village Agents and the potential for its viability in Colchester;
- The robust voluntary sector which Colchester benefitted from such as Helping Hands and Good Neighbours;
- The need for the review of the rural exceptions policy in order to deliver more affordable homes in Colchester and the problem of scarcity of sites and viability issues which restrict the outcomes

John Gili-Ross explained that the Colchester Association of Local Councils comprised around 28 Town and Parish Councils which met on a regular basis to share ideas and to work towards solutions. He had represented CALC on a number of Colchester Borough Council groups such as the Standards Committee, Highways Panel and the 20 mph Task and Finish Group. He was of the view that Parish Councils should be invited to work with the Borough on more community based issues such as the problem of Council owned garage sites. He was of the view that communities could be invited to consider solutions before sale for housing was considered. He had worked on delivering neighbourhood plans which were to be welcomed but had implications in terms of costs and necessary expertise. He was concerned about the allocation of

Section 106 funds across the Parished areas and sought the reinstatement of the publication of this information for ready access by Parish Councils.

Mr Gili-Ross responded to questions from members of the Panel, in particular in relation to:

- The need for problem garage sites to be considered for alternative use such as for housing and the challenge of securing funding partners to assist with this issue

Gordon Steed, on behalf of Colchester Borough Homes (CBH), responded to questions specifically about the issue of single person flats and their allocation for general housing need rather than for people within the community in which the flats were located. He explained that there was a reluctance to change this arrangement as it had served many communities well in the past. Traditionally there had been very little scope but to allocate to the clients in highest need. More recently there had been more choice to allocate local housing to local people. He responded to references to anti social behaviour problems by explaining that CBH had a track record of working with local communities to deal with these issues as quickly as possible. In terms of garage sites, a working party had been set up to look at better uses of the sites generally resulting in five planning applications being submitted for change of use to affordable housing.

Councillor Bourne, Portfolio Holder for Housing, attended and, with the consent of the Chairman, addressed the Panel. She explained that because the Borough was experiencing a housing crisis in respect of available affordable housing, it was inevitable that those garage sites that had fallen into decline were being looked at with a view to providing additional housing. Recent schemes had been developed in partnership with Estuary Housing who would manage the homes with nomination rights being provided to the Council.

Mr Steed went on to explain that CBH were aware that the issues for people in rural communities were very different. Arrangements for the swapping of tenancies were now conducted via the website. However a number of tenants declined to use a computer and needed assistance. CBH utilized the assistance of Village Voices in the Community and had also worked with RCCE. There was a proactive approach to undermine alienation by means of visits conducted in client's homes, provision of support and signposting to GPs or mental health professionals. CBH employed specialist staff to interact with older people and they provided a cash incentive of £750 for people wishing to downsize. The forthcoming welfare reform agenda was likely to affect approaching 700 residents in terms of capped benefits or through under occupation and CBH were committed to sustaining these tenancies where possible.

Robert Johnstone, on behalf of the Colchester Association of Local Councils, explained to the Panel his concerns regarding the maintenance of Public Rights of Way, particularly in circumstances where the implications of planning applications on rights of way did not seem to be taken into account.

Tracey Rudling, on behalf of Colchester Community Voluntary Service, explained that the organisation represented around 300 groups across Colchester, covering mental

health, children and learning disabilities. In 2012 £21m had been raised but this amount had been affected by the economic climate. She was of the view that where an organization was providing positive outcomes, it should continue to receive funding. Some voluntary groups preferred to remain in the voluntary sector, however fewer groups were coming forward to address unmet needs. She was of the view that people were still fearful of computers and this situation needed to be worked on in terms of timeback arrangements or reciprocal giving. The community transport scheme that CCVS had initiated had grown 450% year on year with 46,000 trips provided in 2012 compared to 21,000 in 2011. This scheme successfully provided access to healthcare, leisure facilities and train stations and to town for younger people. There was an aspiration for shopper buses but there was fear that this would contribute to the closure of local shops. She felt there was a need for more carers to help the elderly access transport and CCVS were working with a mini-bus club to address this need.

Ms Rudling responded to a number of questions from members of the Panel, in particular in relation to:

- The need for increased use of community bus services in order to secure their viability for the future
- The possibility of working with neighbouring rural communities such as in Suffolk or in Maldon in order to increase take up of transport schemes
- The possibility of offering other forms of advice such as to resolve legal issues in order to assist local communities.

*RESOLVED* that –

- (i) All the guests be thanked for their valuable contributions to the meeting
- (ii) The various issues identified in relation to the rural communities be acknowledged, with particular emphasis being given to the problems associated with access to the internet.

## **26. Work Programme 2012-13**

The Panel considered a report by the Head of Corporate Management giving details of the Panel's current work programme. The programme has been updated since the previous meeting of the Panel to reflect the decisions that were made and current circumstances.

The Panel was also brought up to date on the latest situation regarding each of the Task and Finish Groups and tribute was paid to the useful work undertaken by all of the Councillors involved.

The Panel was invited to consider and identify potential issues for inclusion in the Work Programme for the Panel for the forthcoming Municipal Year.

*RESOLVED* that –

(i) The contents of the report and the current situation regarding the work programme be noted

(ii) Arrangements be made for the political groups to consider and identify issues for inclusion in the Work Programme for 2013-14.