

Local Members' Interest

N/A

Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee – 24th April 2014

Briefing Report: Staffordshire Rural Forum

Recommendation

That the Select Committee notes progress with regard to the completion and signing of the Staffordshire Rural Declaration; the efforts made to enable the Staffordshire Rural Forum to become an operating, outcome-focused network; and how Staffordshire County Council is contributing towards the delivery of the Staffordshire Rural Forum's priorities.

Report of Mark Winnington, Cabinet Member for Economy and Infrastructure, supported by Gill Heath, Cabinet Support Member for Environment and Rural Affairs

Summary

At their meeting of 16th January 2013, Cabinet agreed that Staffordshire County Council would work with partners to produce a Staffordshire Rural Declaration. The Rural Declaration aims to enable organisations with a vested interest in Staffordshire's rural areas to acknowledge individual and collective responsibilities to create thriving rural communities and successful rural businesses in a living, working and respected countryside. The purpose of this report is to update Members on the work to re-establish the Staffordshire Rural Forum, further to the signing of the Rural Declaration.

Report

Background

Staffordshire's land area is 80% rural and a quarter of the county's population live in these areas. Staffordshire has 'peri-urban' characteristics meaning it has urban and rural features which co-exist and complement each other, and that it provides the 'green space' between the cities of Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham and Derby. Rural Staffordshire has qualities to be enjoyed and celebrated, but equally people can face challenges caused or increased by living or working in rural locations.

The value of our rural areas is understood by Staffordshire County Council, and it created a Commissioner for the Rural County in 2011. The Staffordshire Rural Forum had been in existence within the county a couple of years before then, however was going through a lull in activity at this time. The County Council recognised that it cannot address rural issues on its own, which gave impetus to bringing the Rural Forum back into operation.

The Staffordshire Rural Forum is an informal network of organisations with an economic, environmental or social remit which take a strategic view of the needs of rural communities, businesses and the rural environment. The aim of the Forum is to represent, act and collaborate on behalf of Staffordshire's rural businesses and communities, to address challenges and exploit opportunities that result in tangible and sustainable economic, social, community and environmental benefits for the county's rural areas.

A 'rural visioning' event was held in June 2012 at which interested organisations identified key issues for rural Staffordshire. The event was jointly organised by the County Council and the Staffordshire Rural Forum, and marked the start of the reinvigoration of the Rural Forum.

Staffordshire Rural Declaration and Strategy

By early 2013, multi-organisational agreement had been reached on collective beliefs, and key values and behaviours, which are contained within the Staffordshire Rural Declaration. The Declaration was signed by over 40 organisations and forms the bedrock of how the Staffordshire Rural Forum operates (Appendix A).

The Rural Forum then worked to refine the priorities and desired outcomes it wants to achieve. These are contained within the Staffordshire Rural Strategy published in November 2013, which is structured around the overlapping themes of environment, communities and economy; and which provides a 'driver for change', encouraging a more partnered approach to opportunities and to the issues of greatest need within rural Staffordshire. The Rural Strategy is available on the Rural Forum's website (Appendix B).

The ethos of the Staffordshire Rural Forum and the Staffordshire Rural Declaration reflect many of the operating principles contained within Staffordshire County Council's Strategic Plan for 2014 – 2018, particularly around the 'One Staffordshire Approach' and 'How we work'. The content of the Staffordshire Rural Strategy also supports the achievement of the three priority outcomes within the Strategic Plan (Appendix C).

Governance and next steps

The Rural Forum agreed governance arrangements (a diagram of these are contained in Appendix D) in late 2013 to deliver the Staffordshire Rural

Strategy, which will be co-ordinated through three 'Themed Action Groups' for Environment, Communities and Economy. The Themed Action Groups for the communities and economy themes met for the first time in January 2014 and will work to identify and develop projects over the coming months to start delivering the Rural Strategy's priorities.

Early indications of potential projects include establishing a Rural Chamber to support rural businesses. The County Council and the National Farmers' Union (NFU) have both been in discussion with the Staffordshire Chambers of Commerce about the potential of this project, which could involve other organisations such as the Country Land & Business Association (CLA).

Options are also being explored as to whether the Rural Forum could support the operation of the Staffordshire Rural & Farming Network (RFN). This would allow the Staffordshire RFN to be better resourced, with the RFN and Rural Forum gaining benefit from working more closely, through their respective linkages with Defra and the county's strategic-level partnerships. The RFNs were established by Defra as a network of consultative bodies, enabling rural issues to be fed directly to Defra and allowing Defra to consult with grassroots organisations.

The Environment Themed Action Group is being considered in the context of the Staffordshire Local Nature Partnership (LNP). The emerging Staffordshire LNP is a strategic partnership whose aim is to help bring about improvements in the local natural environment. The intention is to merge Rural Forum and LNP governance arrangements where possible to avoid duplication of effort.

The Rural Forum Steering Group met for the first time in early April 2014. This Group will provide a leadership and oversight function with regard to delivery of the Rural Strategy. The Steering Group will also work to build links with the three strategic-level partnerships within Staffordshire, which further to the LNP, also includes the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the Staffordshire Health and Wellbeing Board.

Staffordshire County Council provides the secretariat for the Staffordshire Rural Forum. Frances Beatty MBE (representing Stafford Borough Council) has recently been elected as the new Chair of the Rural Forum. This role had previously been held by the Community Council of Staffordshire.

Organisations within the Rural Forum will aim to work together in a co-ordinated manner to achieve more than they can on their own, to make best use of resources. It is hoped that delivery of Rural Forum priorities can also be resourced through external funding sources such as the EU Structural & Investment Funds (for example through EAFRD – European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, which includes the community led local development 'LEADER' programme).

Delivering for our rural areas

In addition to helping re-establish the Staffordshire Rural Forum, there are various recent projects which Staffordshire County Council has been involved with that contribute towards the delivery of the Rural Forum's outcomes, or that increase recognition of the rural agenda. Some examples are below:

- As a member of the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire LEP, Staffordshire County Council is helping to shape the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP), which is an ambitious strategy to help the LEP area unlock its growth potential and tackle its underlying economic challenges, and which Staffordshire's rural areas can play a part in achieving.

The Plan's business growth agenda is based on strengths in key aspects of advanced manufacturing including agri-tech. The agri-tech sector focuses on the development of innovative technologies related to agriculture and food production, with the availability of agricultural land in and around the county being seen as a key opportunity in the development of this embryonic sector. The SEP also identifies a longer-term interest in strengthening the tourism sector, with rural areas contributing attractions and natural assets such as Cannock Chase and the Peak District to this offer.

More widely, a number of LEP priority sectors have grown in rural areas in recent years, driven by the attractiveness of rural Staffordshire's environment. A good example of this is the growth of the medical technologies cluster at Keele University Science & Business Park. Plans for the development of employment sites located throughout the county, as highlighted in the SEP, will continue to drive the growth of our priority sectors in rural areas.

- A Staffordshire Rural Proofing Checklist is now included within the County Council's Community Impact Assessment to help assess the impact of policies and services on the countryside and people living and working within it. A rural proofing board game 'Ruropoly' has also been created to provide an alternative means to raise awareness of rural issues and rural proofing.
- Staffordshire County Council, representing the West Midlands, has played an active role in the EU PURPLE network; established to pursue the interests of 'peri-urban' areas at an EU and national scale. The work of the network has included awareness-raising of the 'peri-urban' agenda, lobbying, and will in future involve project work between EU peri-urban regions as new EU funding programmes come on stream.

- The development of multi-use community hubs in rural areas is being considered, and the County Council is in discussion with the Post Office around potential opportunities that could be pursued.
- The Superfast Staffordshire project is building on the commercial rollout to bring fibre broadband to 97% of premises by spring 2016, with high speed broadband being brought to the first properties from April 2014. Additional government funding has recently been made available to reach the hardest to reach locations, which will be used to address those remaining premises that will not have access to superfast speeds, many of which are located in rural areas. In order to take advantage of this funding, match funding needs to be found, therefore Staffordshire County Council is currently seeking ways to match fund the government's indicative allocation of £1.68 million.
- Staffordshire County Council and South Staffordshire Council have been working to explore the issues and opportunities around farm and rural diversification in South Staffordshire. A workshop was held in December 2013 which it is hoped will lead to some practical initiatives being implemented to support the deliverability of diversification schemes in the district.
- The County Council has been involved in developing an Ecosystem Assessment of Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent's natural environment. By calculating the value of services provided by natural habitats, its aim is to recognise the worth and contribution made by our natural resources in order to promote more resilient, equitable and better value decision-making.

Conclusion

Considerable effort has been made by Staffordshire County Council and its partners to re-establish the Staffordshire Rural Forum into an active network with the desire to work collaboratively. Building on the commitment made through the Staffordshire Rural Declaration and the work carried out to create clear governance for operation, the Staffordshire Rural Forum is now well placed to deliver better outcomes for our rural areas, with Staffordshire County Council playing a key role in this.

Contact Officer

Name: Ian Wykes, Commissioner for the Rural County

Telephone: (01785) 277295

E-mail: ian.wykes@staffordshire.gov.uk

- Appendix A: Staffordshire Rural Declaration (separate attachment)
- Appendix B: Staffordshire Rural Strategy
- Appendix C: Links between the Staffordshire Rural Forum, Rural Strategy,
and the Staffordshire County Council Strategic Plan 2014 - 2018
- Appendix D: Staffordshire Rural Forum governance arrangements

Appendix B: Staffordshire Rural Strategy

The Staffordshire Rural Strategy was published in November 2013, following input and comment from a range of partner organisations from across the Staffordshire Rural Forum. The Rural Strategy is structured around three overlapping themes of environment, communities and economy. Delivering the priorities contained within the Rural Strategy will create:

- A rich, varied and valued environment, which is beautiful and culturally rich, available for people to visit, live in and enjoy, contributing to Staffordshire's wealth and prosperity
- Vibrant, thriving and resilient rural communities in which key services are accessible to all; and standards of living, wellbeing and quality of life are high
- A sustainable, prosperous and diverse rural economy, which forms an integral part of the wider economy, contributing to Staffordshire's wealth and prosperity

To coincide with the Rural Strategy's publication, the Staffordshire Rural Forum's website was launched, hosted by the Community Council of Staffordshire. A full version of the Staffordshire Rural Strategy is available on the Rural Forum's website:

<http://www.staffs.org.uk/staffordshireruralstrategy.html>

Appendix C: Links between the Staffordshire Rural Forum, Rural Strategy, and the Staffordshire County Council Strategic Plan 2014 - 2018

Staffordshire County Council's Strategic Plan 2014 – 2018 has a vision to create a connected Staffordshire, where everyone has the opportunity to prosper, be health and happy. Its three priority outcomes are that the people of Staffordshire will:

- Be able to access more good jobs and feel the benefits of economic growth
- Be healthier and more independent
- Feel safer, happier and more supported in and by their community

The priority outcomes are interlinked, and reflect Staffordshire strategic partnership aims around economic growth, health and wellbeing, and community safety. To make a real difference against them will require stronger and closer working connections. All partners will need to work together, co-ordinating their activities and making best use of their resources to allow individuals, families and communities to flourish. The work of the Staffordshire Rural Forum to deliver the outcomes contained within the

Staffordshire Rural Strategy (Appendix B) will contribute towards these, and additionally, towards the County Council's seven sub-outcomes. This includes the sub-outcomes: 'ready for life' (achieving wellbeing through learning and skills), 'great place to live' (creating the best conditions for connectivity and growth), 'right for business' (developing opportunities for employment and innovation), and 'resilient communities' (building stronger and safer communities).

The operating principles for approaching the County Council's vision and outcomes focus are around evolving its relationship with residents, using a 'One Staffordshire' approach and detailing how the County Council will work. They include giving a stronger voice to the people of Staffordshire on the issues that matter; collaborating with residents and communities to identify the best long-term solutions to problems; promoting Staffordshire as the place to invest, live, learn and visit; and being a passionate advocate for Staffordshire.

The commitment by partners from across the Staffordshire Rural Forum to work together, agreeing beliefs and ways of working through signing the Rural Declaration (Appendix A), replicate the 'One Staffordshire' and 'How we work' operating principles. These are as follows:

One Staffordshire

- Focus on leading and influencing for the good of Staffordshire – it doesn't matter who does what as long as it gets done
- Integrate insight, creative thinking and planning with partners inside and outside Staffordshire as appropriate
- Integrate back office, delivery and governance with partners inside and outside Staffordshire as appropriate

How we work:

- Get more joined up, locally and corporately, so we can work with residents, communities and partners to meet local needs more effectively
- Get our financial systems, governance processes and commissioning support aligned to enable delivery of our ambitions
- Everyone associated with the council will go out of their way to understand what local people need, put their needs at the centre of what we do and find new and better ways to improve their lives

Appendix D: Staffordshire Rural Forum governance arrangements

