

Maidstone Borough Council

Leisure and Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 25 January 2011

Rural Economy

Report of: Overview and Scrutiny Officer

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In December 2010 the Committee agreed to review the Rural Economy, focussing on three objectives.
- To identify the key challenges facing the rural economy and what support is offered to new businesses and existing businesses. To determine which factors the Borough Council, in co-operation with its partners could influence in order to strengthen the rural economy;
 - To investigate opportunities to develop appropriate planning and financial policies, preparing for upcoming legislation such as the Localism Bill; and
 - To consider ways of sharing good practice to establish how to improve and support the rural economy, especially small businesses.
- 1.2 The LDF and proposed changes within the Localism Bill will have an impact on the rural economy, and the Committee is requesting further information on how the Council are positioned to respond to the new legislation.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 The Committee is recommended to interview the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Director of Change, Planning & the Environment, Head of Development Management and Head of Spatial Planning with regard to the proposed changes within the Localism Bill to help develop appropriate planning and financial policies to support the rural economy.
- 2.2 Areas of questioning could include but are not limited to:
- What are the practical and impractical implications of the Localism Bill, for the Borough's residents;
 - What is the Council doing to support and assist the development of the rural communities;
 - How has the rural economy been considered as part of the LDF and the core strategy;
 - What consideration has been given to Green Belt and Conservation areas within the Borough; and

- What measures are being taken to ensure the commercial and residential needs and ambitions of the rural community are balanced.

3. Planning Policies & the Localism Bill

- 3.1 On 13 December 2010, The Local Government Association (LGA) published a briefing note on the Localism Bill, confirming the following in relation to planning:
- Abolitionment of Regional Spatial Strategies.
 - Transferring of national infrastructure decisions to the Secretary of State;
 - New powers and processes for parishes; and
 - Newly created neighbourhood forums to develop neighbourhood plans and neighbourhood development orders.
- 3.2 A further briefing note on the Localism Bill was published by the LGA dated 17 January 2011.

The LGA stated their views as follows;

'We support councils having maximum freedom to make spatial plans which reflect the needs and wishes of their residents. Proposed new approaches to pre-application discussion and planning enforcement are also welcome. We do, however, have **significant concerns about the neighbourhood planning policies...**We support the principles behind neighbourhood planning. However, to make this a success, the Government must not impose rigid bureaucratic processes on local people and councils, which only serve to increase complexity and delay, and create opportunities for litigation. The Government's current approach also risks putting too much power in the hands of people who are not elected or removable by a democratic process, without enough assurance of inclusiveness, transparency and financial probity. **The LGA believes there is a far simpler model for communities to work with councils on planning that will not require the 44 pages, 6 Clauses and 3 Schedules proposed in the Bill**, and we want to work with the Government to help put this model into action.'

- 3.3 The following is a quote from Rt. Hon. Francis Maude MP on the Localism Bill;
- "...local areas are bound by the rules and targets imposed by central government, squeezing out room for local understanding and the judgment of those much better placed to understand the complexities and particular context of local problems." (9th June 2010) ¹

¹ The Local Government Association published 17 January 2011
<http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/16195428>

4. Impact on Corporate Objectives

- 4.1 The Strategic Plan 2009-12 states that the Council wants Maidstone to be “a place to achieve, prosper and thrive” which the review of the rural economy is intended to promote.