

Maidstone Borough Council

Leisure and Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 22 March 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 Council and Kent County Council (KCC) have been working in partnership to establish key factors that challenge the rural economy, including issues surrounding broadband coverage as part of KCC's work on the Kent Rural Delivery Framework (KRDF). The Committee is requesting further information on how the Council can support the KRDF and the rural communities.
- 1.3 As the Kent Downs and Marshes Group is assisted by KCC to cover Maidstone and other local authorities, the Committee is requesting further information on how the Leader Programme works, what is its vision for the future and how can we ensure they are realised.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 The Committee is recommended to interview the KCC Rural Regeneration Manager, the Kent Downs and Marshes Leader Programme Manager and Economic Development Manager with regard to the KRDF and Leader Programme to support the rural economy.
- 2.2 Areas of questioning could include but are not limited to:
- What are Maidstone's key challenges – can they be faced and overcome;
 - What is the Council currently doing to support the rural economy;

- Is there more that the Council could do to pro-actively strengthen both residential and commercial aspects of the rural economy;
- Are you aware of other initiatives being undertaken by other local authorities, which if applied to Maidstone could be beneficial for the boroughs' residents; and
- How is the Council supporting the Leader Programme – can you provide examples of projects within Maidstone that has received funding.

3. KRDF & Leader Programme

3.1 Under the new Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) 2007-2013, the Leader approach acts as a delivery mechanism. This is not a fund or set of objectives, but a community led method of harnessing local knowledge, to approach RDPE funding in rural areas which can be used to help deliver a range of Programme Objectives.

3.2 Leader will be implemented through Local Action Groups (LAGs), which should represent public and private partners and local interest groups therefore covering a broad selection of sectors of the local society and economy.

'LAGS will develop and submit Local Development Strategies which will set out their plans for their areas, including selection criteria for local projects. The Selection Panels for LAGs will include representatives from the Regional Development Agencies, which are responsible for the overall management of the delivery of the Leader approach, Natural England and the Forestry Commission. Once the groups are selected, they will be responsible for delivering against their Local Development Strategy, selecting and funding projects which best meet the priorities for their area and support the delivery of their Strategy.¹

3.3 The Leader can provide grants of up to £50,000 (depending on the project) for rural businesses and communities from late 2008 until 2013. This money can contribute to capital or revenue costs, and is available to social and community groups, rural and land based businesses.

'Projects seeking funding must be able to fit with the overall strategies of the Local Action Groups, broadly these are:

- improve the competitiveness and sustainability of Kent's land-based sectors through diversification, innovation, and adding value to products;
- fostering sustainable rural tourism and related businesses; and
- assisting rural communities and businesses in managing change and combating rural deprivation.²

¹ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/rdpe/leader.htm> [accessed 7/3/11]

² <http://www.kentruralnetwork.org.uk/leader> [accessed 7/3/11]

3.2 The KRDF was published by the Kent Rural Board in July 2006 and sets out the first, dedicated multi-agency action plan for Kent's rural areas. The framework is attached at **Appendix A** and sets out:

- a future vision for Kent's rural areas;
- a framework to manage the change currently impacting Kent's rural businesses, communities and environment ; and
- the 15 priority areas for partnership action.

4. Impact on Corporate Objectives

4.1 The new Strategic Plan 2011-15 sets out a priority for Maidstone to have a growing economy. The rural economy review will seek to address this priority.