

# **Maidstone Borough Council**

## **Leisure and Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Tuesday 26 April 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 Network of Rural Business Forums (NRBF) covers various parts of Kent, to inform the review of the rural economy the Committee is requesting further information on how the model of different business forums and the NRBF works, its vision for the future and how can we ensure they are realised. The Committee is requesting further information on how the Council can support the NRBF and the rural communities.

#### **2. Recommendation**

- 2.1 The Committee is recommended to interview the Chairman of Network of Rural Business Forums with regard to business forums that are in place to support the Borough's 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;
  - Is there more that the Council could do to pro-actively strengthen the rural economy;
  - How is your web site managed, by contract or in-house – do you find this to be your best source of advertisement;
  - Do the forums function better being separate or are there plans to combine functions;
  - What are the future plans for the NRBF;

- Are you aware of other rural initiatives being undertaken by other local authorities, which could be beneficial for the boroughs' residents and businesses; and
- Is the Council supporting the NRBF – can you provide examples of projects within Maidstone that has received support.

### **3. NRBF**

- 3.1 The NRBF is a member based forum which brings together businesses and local enterprises in rural communities, enabling them to network, build businesses and share expertise, as highlighted in their slogan 'Business and Community Working Together Throughout Kent'.
- 3.2 Benefits for members include private healthcare, free legal, HR and accounts advice, five networking events a year, two business breakfasts a month and advertising in a local directory to name a few.
- 3.3 The NBRF was created within the past 12 months following the success of Marden Business Forum (MBF) which was founded in 2006 and currently has 130 members from businesses within Marden. It is thought that the MBF contributed to Marden winning the "Calor Kent village of the year" business section in 2009. On 1 December 2010, the Yalding Business Forum was launched and another covering East and West Farleigh, Hunton, Linton, Coxheath and Tovil is due to be launched this year.
- 3.4 Currently the only common factor between the business forums is the Chairman, Elaine Collins; there is no competition between the forums.

### **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.