

Keeping an eye on  
Maidstone

# Leisure & Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee

## Rural Economy

**Municipal Year 2010/11**

### Committee Membership:

Councillor Paine (Chairman)  
Councillor Joy (Vice-Chairman)  
Councillor Burton  
Councillor Mrs Gibson

Councillor Nelson-Gracie  
Councillor Pickett  
Councillor Mrs Smith

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**The report is also available on the Council's website:**

**[www.maidstone.gov.uk/osc](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk/osc)**

## Acronyms

The following are acronyms that may feature throughout this report:

Maidstone Borough Council – MBC

Kent County Council – KCC

Overview and Scrutiny Committee – OSC

Broadband Delivery UK – BDUK

Country Land and Business Association – CLA

Local Action Groups – LAG

Kent Rural Development Framework – KRDF

Network for Rural Business Forum – NRBF

Marden Business Forum – MBF

Local Government Association – LGA

Local Development Framework – LDF

Neighbourhood Development Plans –NDP

Planning Policy Statements – PPS

Strategic Housing Market Assessment – SHMA

South East England Development Agency – SEEDA

Department for Environment food and Rural Affairs – DEFRA

Office for National Statistics – ONS

Department for Business Innovation and Skills – BIS

The Office of Communications – OFCOM

Local Loop Unbundling – LLU

Digital Subscriber Line – DSL

National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency – NGA

Local Action Groups - LAG

## Contents

	Page
Forward .....	4
List of Recommendations .....	5
<b>1. Background</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>2. Terms of Reference</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>3. Methodology</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>4. Introduction</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>5. Key Issues</b> .....	<b>12</b>
5.2 Transport & Accessibility.....	12
5.3 Broadband.....	15
5.4 Reaching the Rural Community.....	22
<b>6. Support for Businesses in the Rural Community</b> .....	<b>23</b>
6.1 Rural Regeneration.....	23
6.2 Kent Rural Development Framework.....	23
6.3 Renewable Energy.....	24
6.4 Leader Programme.....	24
6.5 Business Forums.....	25
<b>7. Addressing Economic Development in Policies &amp; Legislation</b> .....	<b>26</b>
7.1 Planning.....	26
7.2 Housing & Sustainable Development.....	28
<b>8. Communication &amp; Marketing</b> .....	<b>32</b>
8.1 Tourism.....	32
8.2 Neighbourhood Forums.....	32
<b>9. Conclusion</b> .....	<b>35</b>

## Forward

With so much attention focused on retail and the urban centre, we sometimes forget the many small, medium and large enterprises based in our countryside. The diversity of rural business within the Borough is astounding; everything is out there, from the smallest farm shop selling local produce, to large manufacturers of high-tech goods (e.g. top end veterinary equipment, or road sweepers for export to Brazil!). They can be found in discreet hamlets, open countryside, or industrial parks at the edge of large villages.



In Kent, rural businesses generate more than £5.5bn annually, and in Maidstone they account for 30% of our total offer. Our committee found that Maidstone has a thriving Rural Economy with untapped potential for further growth and diversification.

To achieve this, we need to address some of the issues facing rural enterprise. Transport, the lack of broadband, and planning policies were all raised as concerns in our consultation with local companies and expert witnesses. Some of these problems will require money to solve, others can be tackled through better partnership working and new policies. We, the council, may also have a further role to play by finding ways to help share best practice, e.g. through the support and expansion of rural business forums.

On a personal level, this review was an eye-opening experience. When we began, I assumed that our Rural Economy was vulnerable, weak and fragmented as a result of the credit crunch. I was wrong - it is doing remarkably well. The diversity of our companies, the business acumen of rural entrepreneurs, and the benefits of being located in Maidstone – the heart of Kent – have all contributed to this success story. Now we must build on this success, to keep Rural Maidstone competitive and a great place to do business.

I would like to express my thanks to the committee, witnesses and all contributors for making this review a possibility. Finally, I would like to reserve special thanks for Christina Chemsí, our hard working Scrutiny clerk; without her patience, enthusiasm, and late nights, this report would never have left the printers!

Enjoy this read – and please support Maidstone’s Rural Economy.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Stephen Paine". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Cllr Stephen Paine  
Chairman, Leisure and Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee

## List of Recommendations

Pg No.	Ref.	Recommendation
1	4	The Economic Development Strategy July 2008 needs to be revised to show an equal focus on the rural and urban aspects of the Borough and reflect the recent changes concerning the Localism Bill.
12	5.2.1	To lobby for station improvements within the rural areas to allow better disabled access to all platforms.
12	5.2.1	That the Cabinet Members for Environment and Regeneration support the future work programme for 2011/12 and that the rural economy transport issues are suitably addressed as part of the Local Development Framework.
13	5.2.9	The Cabinet Members for Regeneration and Environment should lobby support to the Growth Without Gridlock team on the major priorities concerning Maidstone in the Rail Action Plan for Kent Strategy.
14	5.2.11	As the new plan is being devised, the Committee would like to see a stronger recognition of the rural transport issues and provide detail on how the Council intend to overcome the current obstacles.
19	5.3.9	Following the announcements of the first successful round of applications for the Superfast Broadband Pilot Fund in mid May 2011, the Committee see which applicants have been successful within the borough, and what the next procedure is before this can be implemented.
22	5.5.2	The Cabinet Member for Regeneration seeks methods to educate Maidstone residents in renewable energy benefits, perhaps with the help of Distributed Generation Ltd at possible community and town events.
22	5.5.2	In line with the Council's Sustainable Procurement Strategy , the Council support businesses within the borough when possible
22	5.5.2	The Cabinet Member for Community Services investigates any licence issues regarding obtaining a business recycling point in Marden.
24	6.4.3	The Cabinet Member seeks the possibility of creating a 'bank roll' service, using Cornwall Council as an example, in order to support applicants in the Leader Programme.
24	6.4.3	The Cabinet Member liaises with the Director of Change, Planning and the Environment and the Head of Development Management to reduce the time taken for planning to write confirmation that no planning permission was required on the site concerned. This may include highlighting to the Leader Programme team the process to apply for Certificate for Lawful Developments on sites concerning the Leader Programme.
27	7.1.6	That the Cabinet Member and Leader of the Council should ensure planning policies reflect the contemporary needs of Maidstone's agricultural businesses. Spatial planning policies should be pro-active in encouraging planning applications for renewables and polytunnels (where appropriate and done in a sensitive manner)to help our agricultural community compete.
30	7.2.6	The Committee would like the Council to give encouragement for local affordable housing schemes in the rural communities. Ways of incentivising such schemes should be given consideration.
32	8.1.2	Cabinet Member to pursue lobbying KCC Members to review the procedure for renewing and mending brown tourism signs.
33	8.2	That the neighbourhood forum meets with the business forums from time to time to help lobby the council with issues as a community.
33	8.2.4	The Cabinet Member should review the possibility of adapting the boroughs neighborhood forums using Merton Council as an example.

The Committee would like to thank the following individuals and organisations who have contributed to this report:

### **Maidstone Borough Council**

Economic Development Manager, John Foster  
Economic Development Officer, Keith Grimley  
Head of IT Services, Dave Lindsay  
Director of Change, Planning and the Environment, David Edwards  
Head of Development Management, Rob Jarman  
Head of Spatial Planning, Michael Thornton  
Interim Head of Core Strategy Development, Flo Churchill  
Planning Officer for Spatial Planning, Michael Murphy  
Housing Enabling Officer, Andrew Connors  
Performance & Scrutiny Officer, Clare Wood  
Overview & Scrutiny Officer, Christina Chemsí  
Visitor Economy Business Unit Leader, Laura Dickson  
Assistant Economic Development Officer, Christine Dier

### **Kent County Council**

Liz Harrison, KCC Rural Regeneration Manager  
Huw Jarvis, Programme Manager, Kent Downs and Marshes Leader

### **Network of Rural Business Forums**

Elaine Collins, Chairman

### **National Farmers Union**

Isobel Bretherton, PR Officer

### **Castle Farm, Heath Road, East Farleigh**

Mr & Mrs Checkley

### **Scarabs Sweepers, Pattenden Lane, Marden**

Darren Hoadley, Patrick Golding and Paul Beaney

### **Claygate**

Mel and Andrew Streek

### **Burtens Medical Equipment Ltd**

David Burton and Sue Marshall

### **Haven Farm Shop**

Claire and Neil Samuell

### **Pippa's Tea Room**

June Ross

### **Court Farm, Thurnham Lane, Thurnham**

Nick Leggatt

The Committee would also like to thank the council officers and members of the public who took the time to contact the Committee and offer their opinions and ideas on the rural economy. All of the correspondences received were considered and added a valuable dimension to this review.

## **1. Background**

- 1.1. In February 2009 the Regeneration and Sustainable Communities OSC looked at the Economic Development Strategy and found it to be urban-focused in its remit and implications. The Committee decided that they could look at the Rural Economy as part of its work programme for 2010/11.
- 1.2. In May 2010, Members participated in a Work Programming Workshop to develop ideas for the 2010-11 Overview and Scrutiny Work programmes. Ideas were received from officers, and these were considered alongside Members' own ideas at the workshop by each Committee. Members considered a range of ideas with the potential for further review. The Rural Economy was suggested as a topic, but was not pursued at the time because the Committee decided to wait for a policy steer from the newly-elected Coalition Government in Westminster.
- 1.3. At its meeting on 13 December 2010, the Leisure and Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to carry out a review of the Council's approach to Maidstone's rural economy.
- 1.4. The Committee noted the existing work programme commitments and agreed that working groups report back on particular aspects of the review. The Committee agreed it was important to interview a range of experts and agreed to suggest possible witnesses to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer.
- 1.5. The original Rural Economy scope (see Appendix A) was too broad to be completed within the existing time frame therefore new, punchier terms of reference was adopted by the committee.

## **2. Terms of Reference**

- 2.1. The Committee agreed that, by conducting this review, it would aim to meet the following objectives and desired outcomes:

- 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.



### 3. Methodology

3.1 To consider the range of support currently provided to the rural areas and establish the key challenges that new and existing businesses are facing, the Committee sought evidence from a variety of sources. This included Select Committee-style interviews with:

- the Council's Economic Development Manager (MBC),
- Director of Change, Planning and the Environment (MBC),
- Head of Development Management (MBC),
- Head of Spatial Planning (MBC),
- Rural Regeneration Manager (KCC),
- Rural Leader Programme (KCC),
- Chairman of the Network for Rural Business Forum (NRBF).

Attempts were made to interview a senior witness from SEEDA, but no response was received.

3.2 Public involvement was also considered to be vital for this review. A press release was sent to all residents via the Council's website, while a message was posted in a Maidstone-based group on the social networking site, 'Facebook'. Responses were circulated to the Committee and taken into account during Members' discussions.

3.3 Desktop research was carried out by the Overview and Scrutiny Officer to establish strengths and weaknesses within the rural areas of the borough and the level of support available to the public.

3.4 A business survey was put together to gather anecdotal evidence with the following questions asked:

- What is the nature of your business?
- How long have you been based in a rural area? Why did you choose this area?
- What are your main challenges as a business in the rural area?
- Can you find the relevant support for your business, as and when you need it? If so, who is this predominantly from?
- How do you advertise your business? Are there other methods you'd like to use, but are unavailable?
- How has your business been impacted by the economic recession?
- Are there areas of support you feel could be better provided by Maidstone Borough Council?

3.5 A rural field trip was scheduled for 14 March 2011 to visit a diverse range of rural businesses from across the Borough. The itinerary was:

Full Day
9.30am - Pick up Cllrs from King St
9.45am- East Farleigh <a href="#">visit latest planning approved 40m wind turbine site at Castle Farm</a>
10.30am - leave for Marden
11am - Marden local businesses (Scarab sweepers and Claygate)
12.30 -2pm -Lunch at Marden with Forum Members
2.30pm - Sutton Valence <a href="#">Visit Haven Farm Shop</a>
3pm - Lenham, <a href="#">Pippas' Tea Room</a>
4pm- visit Lenham – <a href="#">site for possible solar panel farm</a>
4.30pm - Go through Thurnham Village <a href="#">visit Nick Leggats'dairy farm – Court Farm</a>
5.30pm/6pm-Back to King St

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**6** Friday, February 11, 2011 Kent Messenger (KM)

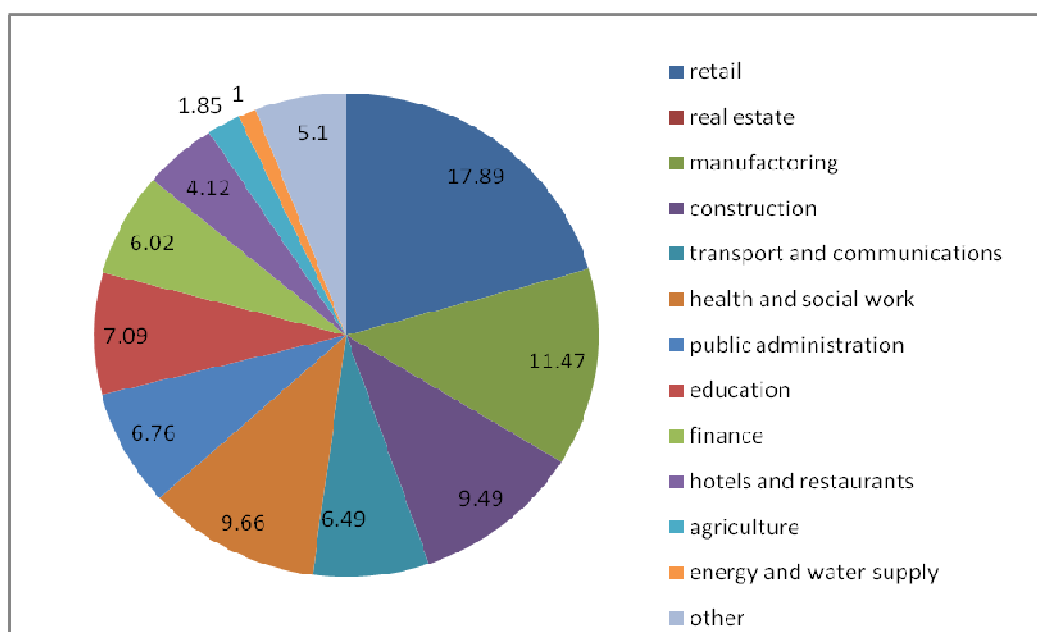
## Business survey

A SURVEY of how out-of-town firms are coping with the downturn and competing with urban shopping centres is being carried out by Maidstone council. It is asking villagers, rural shop workers and farmers to write to Christina Chemsí at [christinachemsi@maidstone.gov.uk](mailto:christinachemsi@maidstone.gov.uk) or call 01622 602463.

## 4. Introduction

- 4.1 In 2006 Maidstone had a total population of 148,460 projected to grow to 157,242 in 2011<sup>1</sup>. In 2009 this equated to 41,210 people in the rural areas, and 106,980 in the urban areas.<sup>2</sup> Maidstone was ranked one of the top ten shopping centres in the south east of England during 2006 with more than one million square feet of retail floor space. It is in the top 50 retail centres in the UK.<sup>3</sup>
- 4.2 The Borough is made up of one large radial-shaped town with several Rural Service Centres, and many smaller villages surrounding these. The Borough is set in the geographical context of Kent with Ashford, Medway and Canterbury competing (and complementing) with the Urban centre, and large Rural villages in other Districts also interacting with Maidstone's Rural economy (e.g. Tenterden). In the rural South East of the Borough, anecdotal evidence suggests that many residents do not shop in Maidstone but travel to Tenterden, Ashford and other 'more accessible' centres instead.
- 4.3 In comparison to national figures, Maidstone has a high percentage of workers in construction and public administration, and a relatively low percentage in agriculture.<sup>4</sup>The total breakdown for employment in the Borough is shown as a percentage in the chart below.

**Percentage of Workers in Borough According to Career**



**Recommendation: The Economic Development Strategy July 2008 needs to be revised to show an equal focus on the rural and urban aspects of the Borough and reflect the recent changes concerning the Localism Bill.**

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.maidstone.gov.uk/annual\\_monitoring\\_report\\_2009/10](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk/annual_monitoring_report_2009/10) Source: KCC, Demographic and labour supply forecasts, October 2010

<sup>2</sup> KCC Research and Intelligence 2009 Ward Level Population Estimates Bulletin '2009 Lower Super Output Area population estimates (experimental); Office for National Statistics (ONS) © Crown Copyright, aggregated to 2009 Ward level population estimates by Research & Intelligence, Kent County Council'

<sup>3</sup> <sup>a</sup> <sup>b</sup> <http://www.alexandrapatrick.co.uk/userfiles/file/Maidstone.pdf> [accessed 28.2.11]

<sup>4</sup> <http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadTableView.do?> [accessed 28.2.11]

- 4.4 Prior to road and rail improvements, the River Medway was one of the principal means of transport for goods to and from Maidstone. In 1739 improvements were made so that barges of 50 to 60 tons could get upriver to East Farleigh, Yalding and even Tonbridge allowing trade including corn, hops, fodder, fruit, stone and timber to pass through the town. In 1879 the medieval stone bridge was replaced to give better clearance with a second bridge, St. Peter's Bridge, built in 1977. These days, the river is only used for pleasure-boat owners and rowers with a number of people living on houseboats, and an annual river festival during the summer. There is very little industry still using the river within the Borough of Maidstone.
- 4.5 Two other rivers flow through Maidstone Borough – the River Len and the River Beult. Neither have been navigable for goods barges, but both facilitated a thriving network of grain and other mills – rural industries which no longer operate here.
- 4.6 Maidstone has a large proportion of businesses in rural areas, standing at just under 30%.<sup>5</sup> There are 73.8% of rural businesses in Maidstone employing 0-4 people, compared to 64% in the urban area, and 5.6% employing 20 or more staff in the rural area compared to 9.8% in the urban area of Maidstone.<sup>6</sup>



River Medway, Maidstone 1934



River Medway, Maidstone 2010

- 4.6 Transport is an issue for the borough, with the bus, train and road networks frequently under pressure to accommodate the growing areas.
- 4.7 The Economy Development Strategy sets the following vision for Maidstone :

**"In 2028, Maidstone is a model '21<sup>st</sup> Century county town'. A distinctive place, known for its blend of sustainable rural and urban living, excellence in public services, vibrant service sector-based economy, and above all, quality of life."<sup>7</sup>**

<sup>5</sup> Maidstone Economic Development Strategy July 2008.

<sup>6</sup> <http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadTableView.do?> [accessed 28/2/11]

<sup>7</sup> Maidstone Economic Development Strategy July 2008.

## Key Findings

5.1 Members of the Leisure & Prosperity Committee approached rural businesses within Maidstone with a Rural Business Survey that was designed to identify key challenges facing the rural economy.

Poor internet connections, late or erratic postal service, heavy use of fuel as no alternative for travel.

5.1.1 One of the questions was 'What are your main challenges as a business in the rural area?' Common answers were the difficulties with transport and poor internet connections. The bad winter weather also featured as a problem for transport as both the road and rail services were severely affected.

## 5.2 Transport and Accessibility

5.2.1 There are 12 train stations within the borough, of which 9 are in the surrounding rural areas. However, only one has a step-free platform, making it harder for disabled commuters.

5.2.3 There are 23 Arriva Bus routes providing transport to rural areas out of the 41 routes or, 43 buses connected with Maidstone.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, there are 10 Nu-Venture Bus routes out of a possible 16 or 18 busses that provide transport to rural communities.<sup>9</sup> Although this may be sufficient, the times of the busses are not suitable for a variety of bus users, in particular young people and workers, as the last bus from Hollingbourne to Maidstone for example is 16.47pm. Many people working in Hollingbourne would not have finished work by this time.

**Recommendations: To lobby for station improvements within the rural areas to allow better disabled access to all platforms; That the Cabinet Members for Environment and Regeneration support the future work programme for 2011/12 and that the rural economy transport issues are suitably addressed as part of the Local Development Framework.**

5.2.4 "Rural places make up 86% of England. Nearly one-fifth of our population live and work there (9.8 million people), in a patchwork of farms, hamlets, villages and towns"<sup>10</sup>.

5.2.5 According to KCC, 85% of Kent is rural in nature, and 13% of rural households have no access to a private car. Transport is vitally important for individuals and communities in rural areas, who can often be at risk of social exclusion.

5.2.6 Kent County Council's Local Transport Plan (2006-2011) supports Maidstone's Integrated Transport Plan and aims to:

*"provide good, safe accessibility to jobs and services for all sections of the community in Kent, and to improve the environment and health of the community by reducing congestion and pollution, widening the choice of transport available, and by developing public transport, walking and cycling."<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>8</sup> [www.arrivabus.co.uk](http://www.arrivabus.co.uk) [accessed 28/2/11]


<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nu-venture.co.uk> [accessed 28/2/11]

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/communities/> [accessed 28/4/11]

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.kent.gov.uk/static/local-transport-plan/chapter\\_46.html](http://www.kent.gov.uk/static/local-transport-plan/chapter_46.html) [accessed 4/3/11]

5.2.7 On 22 March 2011, the Committee heard from Kent County Council's (KCC) Rural Regeneration Manager, Liz Harrison who stated that 'the issues surrounding transport in the rural area were hard to address due to the lack of resources in the transport infrastructure'. However, as there is no specific rural strategy covering this, she advised the Committee to refer any transport concerns within the review to the 'Growth without Grid-lock strategy' and KCC's Highways team.' The full minutes of this meeting are attached at Appendix B.

5.2.8 The Growth without Grid-lock strategy identifies local priorities for KCC with their district council partners, some are shown below:



The map shows several districts in Kent: Dartford, Gravesham, Medway, Swale, Maidstone, Tunbridge & Malling, Tunbridge Wells, and Ashford. Each district is highlighted in a different shade of green. Surrounding callout boxes provide specific priorities for Maidstone, Swale, Tunbridge Wells, and Ashford.

**Maidstone**

- Transport infrastructure needed to support proposed jobs and housing growth planned for the area
- Re-instating frequent rail services to the city of London

**Swale**

- Provision of necessary transport infrastructure to open up key areas for development
- Improved access to Sittingbourne town centre

**Tunbridge Wells**

- Improved traffic management and Park and Ride to tackle congestion and poor air quality in the town centre
- A21 improvements to reduce congestion and support access to proposed Pembury Hospital

**Ashford**

- Introduction of Smartlink to link growth areas with town centre and Ashford International
- Improved access from development sites onto the M20

5.2.9 The strategy states that they are producing a **Rail Action Plan for Kent** which will be used to inform future rail investment and service plans, both in the short term and for future rail franchises. The Cabinet Members for Regeneration and Environment should be encouraged to lobby Maidstone Borough Council's support on the major priorities concerning Maidstone, listed below:

- Reinstatement of the City service to Maidstone and West Malling.
- Feasibility of extending high-speed services from Ebbsfleet to Maidstone West.
- Improvements to the North Kent line
- Investigating the feasibility of introducing a through service between Gatwick and Kent after 2015.
- Including Maidstone East as the principal Kent terminus for Thameslink services from 2018.

5.2.10 The Committee are aware of Growth without Gridlock's inadequate level of funding for district roads due to the priority being large scale capital investment on the strategic network (e.g. a second Thames crossing).

**Recommendation: The Cabinet Members for Regeneration and Environment should lobby support to the Growth Without Gridlock team on the major priorities concerning Maidstone in the Rail Action Plan for Kent Strategy.**

5.2.11 The Maidstone Integrated Transport Strategy 2005-2015 notes that there is a need to improve accessibility to jobs and services throughout the Borough<sup>12</sup>, as supported by the Government when the Department of Transport required that each Local (Transport) Authority develop an Accessibility Strategy as a core component of their Local Transport Plan for the 2006 – 2011. As the new plan is being devised, the Committee would like to see a stronger recognition of the rural transport issues and provide detail on how the Council intend to overcome the current obstacles.

5.2.12 The Council's Integrated Transport Strategy has sought to address a number of issues identified by the Council's Transport User Group and Mobility Focus Group including:

- **"Lack of accessible rail stations and trains**

Whilst plans are being drawn up for improvements to Maidstone East and Staplehurst stations, there is a lack of information on how other journeys are to be made. Issues regarding the design of the new rolling stock also remain unanswered.

- **Only a limited number of accessible buses operating on a limited number of routes**

Single deck routes have significantly improved accessibility during the past year, but apart from the service to Medway, no other double deck buses are currently accessible. New easy access buses were placed in service on the Park and Ride services in the spring of 2004.

- **Insufficient bus stops with easy access facilities**

Most bus stops on Sutton Road, London Road, Tonbridge Road, Loose Road and in Shepway now have bus boarders or raised kerbs, and some others have also been adapted when circumstances permit. Only a few town centre bus stops have so far been adapted and this means that it is difficult for some persons to undertake journeys. Earlier plans to extend the coverage of such stops have been delayed or suspended. Uncontrolled parking at such stops prevents buses making use of the facility.

- **Difficulty of obtaining taxis at certain times and in rural areas**

Reducing the possibility of attending or accessing facilities, or making it prohibitively expensive to do so.

- **Lack of completed "drop-kerb" pavement routes**

A town centre guide has been issued showing the locations of dropped kerbs and other access features. Whilst much work has been undertaken in this area there are still a number of routes that cannot be undertaken."<sup>13</sup>

**Recommendation: As the new plan is being devised, the Committee would like to see a stronger recognition of the rural transport issues and provide detail on how the Council intend to overcome the current obstacles, such as early last bus time of some buses.**

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.maidstone.gov.uk/pdf/050603\\_its.pdf](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk/pdf/050603_its.pdf) [accessed 4/3/11]

<sup>13</sup> Maidstone Integrated Transport Strategy 2005—2015

## 5.3 Broadband Internet Connection



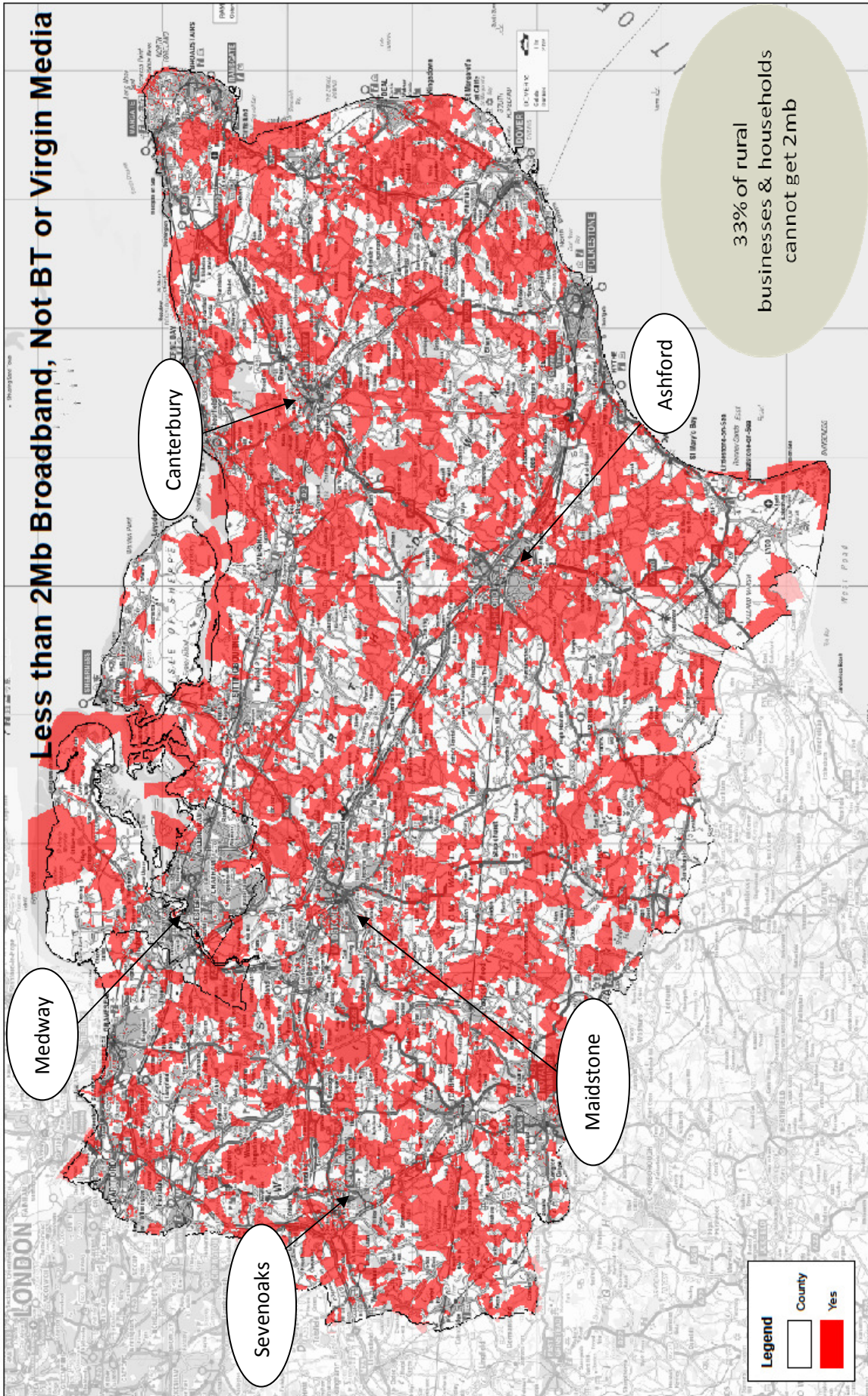
- 5.3.1 A large portion of the response from the business survey indicated that Broadband coverage was a huge obstacle for them, with some companies requiring more than one line to support coverage as the connection can fluctuate at any given moment. KCC's Liz Harrison pointed out an agricultural need for broadband – for example, farmers need access to the internet in order to claim and manage their Single Farm Payments (SFP). Other reasons for the necessity of a good broadband connectivity for businesses include products such as audio and video conferencing, radio, television and news broadcasts. Smaller companies who need to create their own web page will also require a good connection, as domain, web and email hosting is paramount to a communicative business.
- 5.3.2 Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) has been created within the Department for Business Innovation & Skills (BIS) as a delivery vehicle for the Government's policies on broadband. Its vision states "*...Our goal is simple: within this parliament we want Britain to have the best superfast broadband network in Europe.*"<sup>14</sup> They aim to deliver a fibre point in every community in the UK by the end of this parliament, so that homes and businesses even in the most remote places, can receive a decent level of connectivity.
- 5.3.3 The map below shows the areas within Kent that are not able to receive 2megabytes of internet connectivity.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> <http://interactive.bis.gov.uk/comment/bduk/> [accessed 9/3/11]

<sup>15</sup> KCC briefing to MBC on BDUK 24/2/11



# Less than 2Mb Broadband, Not BT or Virgin Media



0 5 10 20 Kilometers

Produced by The KCC GIS Team  
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 Ref: ma1674\_7

5.3.4 The BDUK is currently engaging with various stakeholders, including the 'industry', public sector bodies, OFCOM, regional bodies and community groups to ensure the following:

- Develop the commercial and delivery models that will be used for investing public money in broadband;
- Plan and execute 4 superfast broadband pilots to ensure that the maximum information is gained for targeting potential future government intervention;
- Investigate the detail of reuse of public sector networks and assets, identify the challenges and develop solutions;
- Develop tools and guidance for communities to come together to help solve their broadband issues; and
- Develop tools and guidance for local authorities wishing to help solve broadband issues in their areas.

5.3.5 By comparison, the BDUK goal of 'having the best superfast broadband network in Europe'<sup>16</sup> is a tall order. According to the New York Times, **'the paradises of broadband – Japan, South Korea and Sweden – can surf far faster and far cheaper...than the likes of the United States'**<sup>17</sup> due to broadband deployment spurred by a combination of heavy government involvement, subsidies and lower corporate profits. It continues to say that 'Sweden has built one of the fastest and most widely deployed broadband networks in Europe because its government granted tax breaks for infrastructure investments, directly subsidized rural deployment, and, perhaps most significantly, required state-owned municipal utilities to create local backbone networks, reducing the cost for the local telephone company to provide service.'<sup>18</sup>

5.3.6 However, since then KCC have produced a survey on the 'Broadband Leadership' which is shown below. This shows that Japan is now third, with Sweden twelfth, the United States nineteenth and the UK a disappointing twenty-fifth.

### Broadband Leadership Survey October 2010

Rank	Country
1	S. Korea
2	Hong Kong
3	Japan
4	Iceland
5=	Luxembourg
5=	Singapore
5=	Switzerland
8	Malta
9	Netherlands
10=	Qatar
10=	United Arab Emirates
12	Sweden
13	Denmark
14	Norway
15	Bahrain
16=	Finland
16=	Ireland
18	Israel
19=	Canada
19=	France

Rank	Country
19=	Latvia
19=	Slovenia
19=	United States
24	Belgium
25=	Estonia
25=	Germany
25=	United Kingdom
28	Cyprus
29	Taiwan
30=	Australia
30=	Spain
32=	Lithuania
32=	Portugal
34	Romania
35	Czech Republic
36=	Greece
36=	New Zealand
38	Austria
39	Italy
40	Bulgaria

<sup>16</sup> <http://interactive.bis.gov.uk/comment/bduk/> [accessed 9/3/11]

<sup>17</sup> The New York Times, March 12 2009, by Saul Hansell

<sup>18</sup> <http://nytimes.com/2009/03/12/the-broadband-gap-why-do-they-have-more-fiber/> [accessed 9/3/11]

5.3.7 Head of IT Services, Dave Lindsay informed the Committee that MBC 'are doing a joint bid for £50m of government funding for broadband improvement. It's called Broadband Delivery UK... The aim would be to cover as much of Kent with some work of broadband.'<sup>19</sup>



5.3.8 On 28 February 2011, KCC announced a '£1.5 million **Superfast Broadband Pilot Fund** to help rural communities benefit from high speed broadband. This money is available to community groups, parish councils or local authorities. All applications must have a sound business case and show the economic benefits of fast broadband and must be submitted by 14 April 2011.'<sup>20</sup> The maximum amount of funding available for each case is £100,000. The Committee noted that it would be difficult for communities already suffering from low speed connectivity to apply for this online, as it was not clear what other advertising methods were used by KCC. Announcements of the first successful round of applications will be made in mid May 2011, when the Committee would be interested to see which applicants have been successful within the borough.

5.3.9 With many areas in Kent having 'not spots' (i.e. either slow broadband or none at all), it is hoped that this funding will bring economic benefit to businesses in the rural areas. The KCC continued to say that "however, there are only so many communities we can help, and **ultimately by helping to prove the demand for broadband we hope the telecomms providers will take responsibility for bringing this technology to 'harder to reach' areas as well as benefiting from the more profitable urban areas.** There will be further KCC funds available in the Summer and Autumn to enable a total of 15 areas to benefit, but it would be great to see the private sector recognizing the need too."<sup>21</sup>

5.3.10 This is not the only source of funding available for broadband provisions with rural communities. Since 2006, '17 parishes have received more than £600,000 to help install new broadband'<sup>22</sup> within Kent, for example, Iwade in Sittingbourne.

5.3.11 On 28 February 2011, KCC Cabinet Member for Business Strategy and Support, Roger Gough, said: "This funding also supports KCC's '**Connecting Kent**' campaign to build market demand in Kent and lobby for better and faster broadband services. This campaign will be launched in the next few weeks and we want businesses and the

<sup>19</sup> Email from Dave Lindsay to Christina Chemsí 3/3/11.

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.kent.gov.uk/community\\_grants\\_and\\_funding/community\\_broadband/news](http://www.kent.gov.uk/community_grants_and_funding/community_broadband/news) [accessed 3/3/11]

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.kent.gov.uk/community\\_grants\\_and\\_funding/community\\_broadband/news](http://www.kent.gov.uk/community_grants_and_funding/community_broadband/news) [accessed 3/3/11]

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.kent.gov.uk/community\\_grants\\_and\\_funding/community\\_broadband/news](http://www.kent.gov.uk/community_grants_and_funding/community_broadband/news) [accessed 3/3/11]

residents of Kent to get behind us, so together we can lobby for superfast broadband.”<sup>23</sup>

5.3.12 In November 2010, Point Topic Ltd published a report showing the ‘Measures of infrastructure’ that they used to calculate the broadband infrastructure of an area. As there are a variety of ways to do this, Point Topic focused on six which covered the various different options between them. They are:

1. “Local loop unbundling (LLU) availability; where do operators such as TalkTalk and Sky provide LLU-based services?
2. Twenty-first century network (21CN) roll-out; where is BT’s 21CN technology implemented?
3. Cable coverage; where does Virgin Media offer broadband over its cable network?
4. 2Mbps downstream; where can end-users expect to get broadband services of at least 2 megabytes per second download speeds, whether over the BT and LLU DSL networks, or by cable or fibre-based “next generation access” (NGA)?
5. Current (end-2010) NGA availability; which areas are enabled for some form of NGA service today?
6. Future NGA prospects; what is the average probability that this area will have NGA service by end-2015?”<sup>24</sup>

5.3.13 All these measures can be expressed in the same terms; the percentage of premises (homes and businesses) in the area which have access to each particular feature of broadband infrastructure. The below table reflects the results of Kent and its local authorities. Clearly, Maidstone is not competing with its neighbouring local authorities, as it is ranked 10<sup>th</sup> out of 13.

<u>Local Authority</u>	<u>Total Premises</u>	<u>Index</u>
Medway	111,924	67.96%
Dartford	41,714	67.40%
Gravesham	43,169	67.07%
Swale	58,588	56.56%
Canterbury	67,808	50.99%
Ashford	50,699	50.51%
Tonbridge and Malling	50,700	50.06%
Tunbridge Wells	48,011	49.61%
Thanet	62,557	48.92%
Maidstone	64,727	48.33%
Shepway	48,785	48.24%
Dover	50,558	46.54%
Sevenoaks	52,028	41.95% <sup>25</sup>

**Recommendation:  
Following the announcements of the first successful round of applications for the Superfast Broadband Pilot Fund in mid May 2011, the Committee see which applicants have been successful within the borough, and what the next procedure is before this can be implemented.**

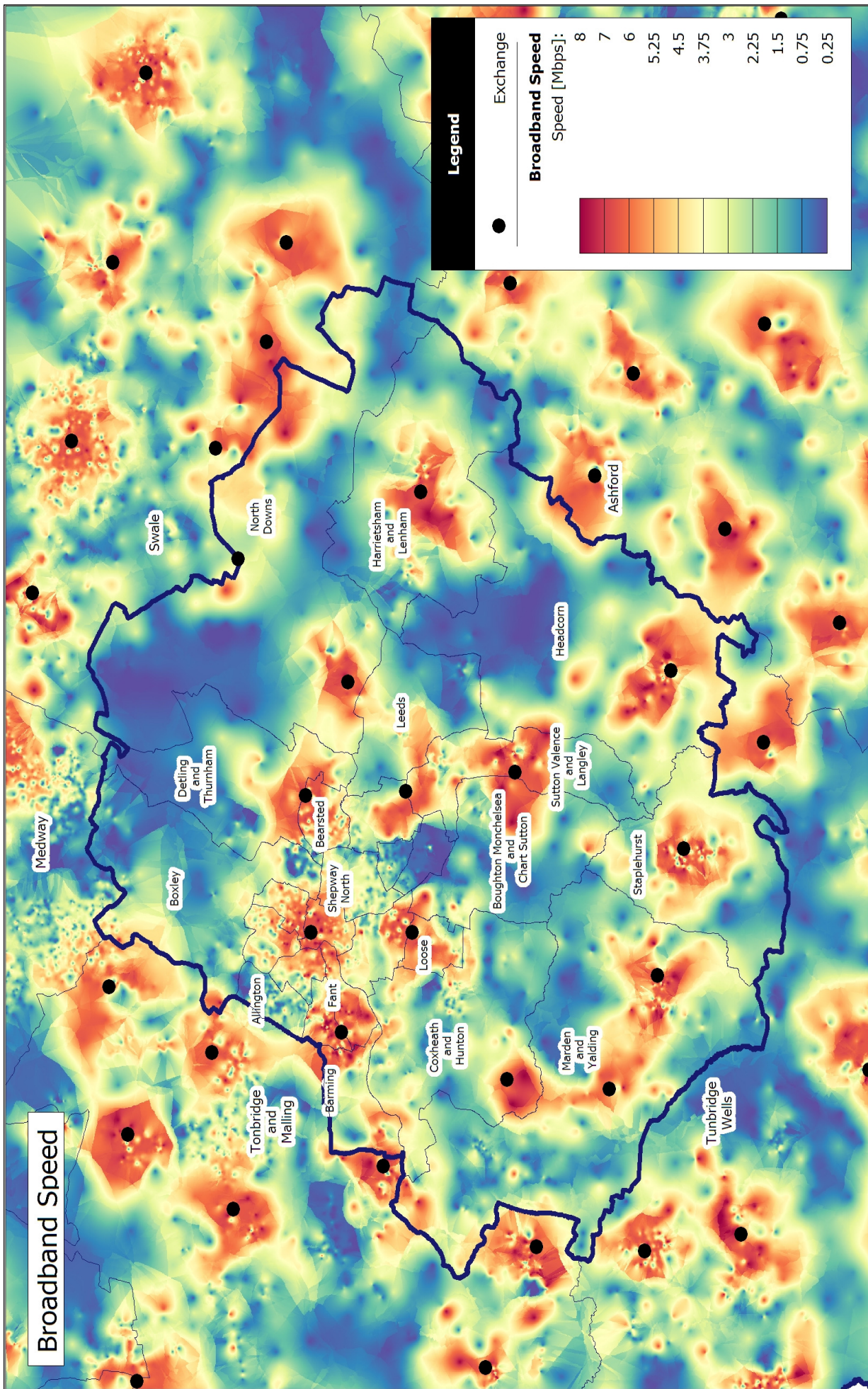
5.3.14 As part of the ongoing work that the MBC’s IT section are doing together with KCC, the Committee requests that they are updated with how this progresses, both the success from lobbying and the timescale expected to begin the broadband improvements.

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.kent.gov.uk/community\\_grants\\_and\\_funding/community\\_broadband/news](http://www.kent.gov.uk/community_grants_and_funding/community_broadband/news) [accessed 3/3/11]

<sup>24</sup> Point Topic Ltd, ‘How good is your town’s broadband?’ Nov 2010.

<sup>25</sup> <http://point-topic.msgfocus.com/c/1a00ZTvJrCfVYXAH> [accessed 11/3/11]

5.3.15 The below graph shows the connectivity speed throughout Maidstone borough. As can be seen, there are many areas that are in need of this before the proposed time of 2015. Particular areas that are suffering from less than 1Megabyte are Boughton Malherbe, Marden, Coxheath, Boughton Monchelsea, Detling and Thurnham. Areas that are able to receive 5Mb or more include Harrietsham and Lenham, Staplehurst, Sutton Valence, Bearsted, Headcorn and town wards, in particular Fant, High Street and Shepway North.



## 5.4 **Reaching the Rural Community**

On Monday 14 March 2011, the Committee, and two spatial planning officers took part in a field trip that was organised by the Overview and Scrutiny Officer. The Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Cllr Malcolm Greer, was also invited.

5.4.1 The field trip was organised to gain a better understanding of the diversity of businesses in Maidstone's rural area and to ascertain key challenges facing the rural economy.

5.4.2 Recommendations that were established on the day were found in the following:

After talking to the owners of Castle Farm and to Darran Potter from Distributed Generation Ltd, the Committee realised there is a need to promote education about the need for and role of renewables in the rural area – both as ways to help businesses lower their carbon footprint as well as become more economically stable.

**Recommendation: The Cabinet Member for Regeneration seeks methods to educate Maidstone residents in renewable energy benefits, perhaps with the help of Distributed Generation Ltd at possible community and town events.**

During a tour of Scarab Sweepers, who build and export sweepers for both national and international markets, the Committee learnt that certain sweeper parts come from Europe, with the vast majority coming from within the UK, including 50-70 tonnes of steel every four weeks.

**Recommendation: In line with the Council's Sustainable Procurement Strategy, the Council support businesses within the Borough when possible.**

The group visited Claygate Distribution who distribute bathrooms and accessories for retailers. Claygate anticipated growth when they built their new facilities, which also included provisions for recycling water, glass which retains heat, air-conditioning which also controls the heating, low energy and sensed lighting as well as a generator which is used frequently for maintaining adequate electricity levels. However, the main challenge they face is being able to recycle things such as wood.

**Recommendation: The Cabinet Member for Community Services investigates any licence issues regarding obtaining a business recycling point in Marden.**

5.4.3 The full account of the field trip is attached at Appendix C.

## 6. Support for Businesses in the Rural Community

*"So the rural challenge today includes supporting new, better-paid and diverse employment opportunities, providing the homes needed for those who live and work in rural areas on low incomes, and maintaining and evolving the services they rely on. The greater challenge is to achieve this while genuinely enhancing rural communities, increasing local and national sustainability in the context of climate change, and continuing to conserve the open countryside to ensure environmental security, food security, and access to open countryside for the enjoyment of all."*<sup>26</sup>

### 6.1 Rural Regeneration

The Committee heard from Mrs Liz Harrison, KCC Rural Regeneration Manager who informed the Committee that 40% of Kent's businesses were located in the rural areas, and although it was recognised that farming was an important component, it was not the only industry in rural areas. Research had shown that there were many similarities between industries in the urban and rural areas and rural businesses generated £5.5 billion per annum to Kent's economy.<sup>27</sup>

### 6.2 Kent Rural Development Framework

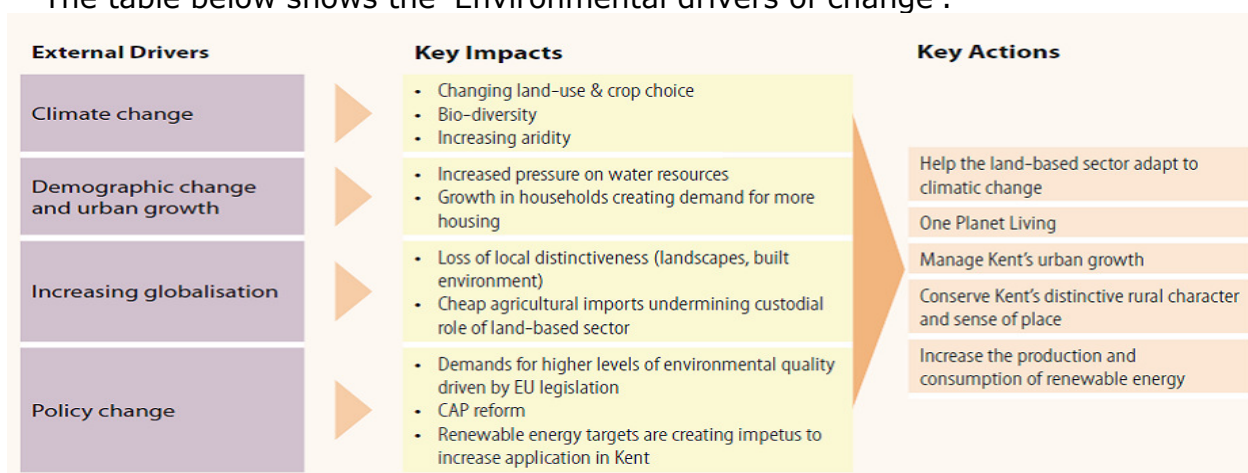
The Kent Rural Development Framework (KRDF) was published by KCC in June 2007 with a vision for rural Kent in 2017 covering three main areas, including;

- to be a pioneering rural economy;
- with vibrant rural communities; and
- a valued rural environment.

6.2.1 In order to achieve this, a range of priority themes for action have been identified;

- Conserve Kent's distinctive rural character and sense of place
- Help the land-based sector to adapt to the impacts of climate change
- Increase the production and consumption of renewable energy across rural Kent
- Manage the impacts of urban growth
- Live within environmental limits (One Planet Living)

The table below shows the 'Environmental drivers of change'.



28

<sup>26</sup> The Rural Challenge, Achieving sustainable rural communities for the 21st century, by Matthew Taylor Aug 2010

<sup>27</sup> Minutes from the Leisure & Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 22 March 2011

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.kentruralnetwork.org.uk/kent-rural-framework>



## **Renewable Energy**

6.3 Whilst on the field trip that took place on Monday 14 March 2011, the group heard of the difficulties rural companies (in particular farms) have with adapting their business to utilise renewable sources. However, their obstacles were not only due to planning permission, finances and geographic location but also due to human misconception of how efficient, quiet, and communally beneficial renewable energy can be.

6.3.1 The benefits have been stated in the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) vision statement in section 7.4.12, as emphasis in their statement was placed on renewable energy policies and the need for a balanced approach to sustainable development. The report showed that technologies such as anaerobic digestion, as well as gas, wind and solar farms, and biomass and biogas heating should be favoured where feasible by planning authorities.

6.3.2 It was also noted in the policies and legislation section of 7.2.5 as there would also be changes to enforcement powers, when the current 27 planning policy statements were being condensed into one, and it is hoped that details in Planning Policy Statements (PPS) PPS7, sustainable development in rural areas, PPS4, sustainable economic growth and PPS22, renewable energy are not lost.

## 6.4 **Leader Programme**

On 22 March 2011, the Committee heard from Mr Huw Jarvis, Kent Downs and Marshes Leader Programme Manager about the Leader Programme. The Leader Programme is implemented through Local Action Groups (LAGs) and provides grants of up to £50,000 (depending on the project) for rural businesses and communities up until 2013.

6.4.1 '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.<sup>29</sup>

6.4.2 Mr Jarvis explained how the membership was set up within the LAGs, and that each member stood for two years. Currently a member from Shepway Council represented Dover, Ashford, Shepway and Canterbury and that a member from Swale Council represented Medway, Maidstone and Swale.

6.4.3 The Leader Programme had identified obstacles that were identified as part of the application process 'was the upfront funding required from the applicant. Although the programme would match 50% of the funding required (up to £50,000), many applicants did not have the funding upfront to support this. Mr Jarvis gave an example of a local authority who had created a 'bank roll' service, whereby they provided the funding upfront on a 0% interest, and they received the funding back within two months. The Committee were very interested in how this local authority, Cornwall, made this work and requested further information be provided with a view to consider this as a way forward. Mr Jarvis also highlighted another obstacle with regard to

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.kentruralnetwork.org.uk/leader> [accessed 7/3/11]

obtaining written confirmation from planning that no planning permission was required on the site concerned, as this was possibly taking longer than necessary.<sup>30</sup>

**Recommendations: The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services seeks the possibility of creating a 'bankroll' service, using Cornwall Council as an example, in order to support applicants in the Leader Programme;  
The Cabinet Member for Regeneration liaises with the Director of Change, Planning and the Environment and the Head of Development Management to reduce the time taken for planning to write confirmation that no planning permission is required on the site concerned. This may include highlighting to the Leader Programme team the process to apply for Certificate for Lawful Development on sites concerning the Leader Programme.**

## 6.5 **Business Forums**

The Network for Rural Business Forum (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'.

- 6.5.1 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.
- 6.5.2 The Committee received a written statement from Elaine Collins, Chairman of the NRBF which was created within the past 12 months following the success of Marden Business Forum (MBF). The Common Factors between the MBF and NRBF are the Chairman Elaine Collins is Chairman of both the MBF and NRBF. In summary, 15 members of the MBF committee are involved in the NRBF in some way.
- 6.5.3 On Tuesday 26 April 2011 the Committee heard from Councillor Burton, Vice-Chairman for MBF that the MBF was created following a Kent County Council (KCC) proposal to install a roundabout in the village which would interfere with local traders road usage. As a community of traders, they collaborated their skills and knowledge to petition against the roundabout proposal, which proved successful. This led them to believe that a network of business traders would be valuable. The Parish boundary was used as a boundary for members, they achieved a membership of 130 businesses out of a possible 200, employing 2500 people collectively. The MBF had created a training programme that allowed one company at a time to apply for a grant via the Skills South East. They would then distribute the training within the MBF members accordingly, using their own skilled trainers.
- 6.5.4 The Committee enquired how many people come to the meetings, and whether it was open to the public. Councillor Burton, confirmed that the meetings were not open to the public; however they were open to all Members and network events that took place four times a year received between 40 and 100 people, depending on the season. Annually there were one or two exceptions who did not renew their membership, but they retained as close to 100% as thought possible.
- 6.5.5 In response to a question, the Committee learnt that although it was believed that the MBF had been successful due to being parochial, there was a danger of it becoming

<sup>30</sup> Minutes from the Leisure & Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 22 March 2011

stagnant. In response to this they occasionally meet with other forums to cross-fertilize ideas, whilst each forum remained distinctly local.

“It is often forgotten that there is a close interaction between economy, community and environment in rural areas. This serves as a lesson for sustainable development elsewhere. Environmentally good land management produces a valuable backdrop for inward investment and tourism, but that management can only be sustainable on the back of profitable use of land and buildings.

This use generates jobs and incomes which lead to the need for housing in all rural settlements, whether remote or not and, ultimately, all of the above assists in the maintenance of sustainable communities, the retention of some rural services, and, importantly, income to support the maintenance of the landscape and environmental habitats.”

Country Land & Business Association,  
‘Planning for Change in the Countryside’ published May 2010.

## 7. Addressing Economic Development in Rural Areas Policies and Legislation

### 7.1 Planning

On 13 December 2010, The Local Government Association (LGA) published a briefing note on the Localism Bill, confirming the following changes in relation to planning:

- Abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies.
- Transferring of national infrastructure decisions to the Secretary of State;
- New powers and processes for parishes; and
- Newly created voluntary community groups to develop neighbourhood plans and neighbourhood development orders.

7.1.1 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.’<sup>31</sup>

7.1.2 On 25 January 2011, the Leisure & Prosperity Scrutiny Committee heard from David Edwards, Director of Change, Planning and the Environment, Rob Jarman, Head of Development Management and Michael Thornton, Head of Spatial Planning about how the Council are positioned to respond to the new legislation proposed within the Local Development Framework (LDF) and the proposed changes within the Localism Bill that will have an impact on the rural economy.

<sup>31</sup> The Local Government Association <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/16195428> [accessed 18 January 2011]

7.1.3 'Mr Edwards summarised that the rural economy was very important to the borough as 30 percent of businesses were within the rural areas, representing a key contribution to the whole Borough's economy.'<sup>32</sup>



7.2.2 Although the Localism Bill is still in its early stages, it is anticipated that further information should form over the coming 6-9 months.

7.1.4 The Localism agenda has created Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDP) in addition to the LDF that was currently in place. The new NDPs will allow local communities to put forward plans to develop their areas providing they agree with the LDF. **Mr Thornton informed the Committee that NDPs would be approved by a referendum of local residents only, it would not include the businesses within that area.** This could potentially create tension between the communities, regardless of how helpful the NDP process is intended to be for rural economies.

7.1.5 There are areas causing concern over the practicality of the changes proposed by the Bill. For example; "social housing reforms having an 'affordable rent' and the community having the 'right to buy' assets".<sup>33</sup>

7.1.6 There would also be changes to enforcement powers, as the current 27 planning policy statements were being condensed into one. **The Planning Policy Statements (PPS) that would most affect the rural economy are PPS7, sustainable development in rural areas, PPS4, sustainable economic growth and PPS22, renewable energy.** It is hoped that important details within these are not lost when merged.

7.1.7 Mr Jarman told the Committee that if Kent suppliers could not meet supermarket standards, they would simply look elsewhere, regardless of the public becoming more interested in where their food originates from. He advised the Council to be 'mindful of this when receiving planning applications for things such as polytunnels'. ' Mr Jarman stated that within planning they were noticing change, for example the recent approval of the first wind turbine in Maidstone and the application they had received for a solar panel park, which would set a trend for similar applications to come in the future.'<sup>34</sup>

7.1.8 The Country Land & Business Association explained that many national planning policies have the effect of impacting disproportionately on rural businesses and communities, highlighting that 'speed is of the essence if we are to provide rural businesses with the same tools as are provided to urban businesses'.<sup>35</sup>

7.1.9 The Committee heard that retail businesses often require a lot of residential properties and a viable transport system already in place, before they settle in a village.

7.1.10 The information presented at scrutiny meeting was published in the Maidstone KM on 4 February 2011, page 27, set out below.

<sup>32</sup> Minutes of the Leisure and Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held Tuesday 25 January 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Minutes of the Leisure and Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held Tuesday 25 January 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Minutes of the Leisure and Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held Tuesday 25 January 2011.

Photograph from <http://www.thelocalismbill.co.uk/>

<sup>35</sup> Country Land & Business Association, 'Planning for Change in the Countryside – A CLA Position Statement' May 2010

**Recommendation: That the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Leader of the Council should ensure planning policies reflect the contemporary needs of Maidstone's agricultural businesses. Spatial planning policies should be proactive in encouraging planning applications for renewables and polytunnels (where appropriate and done in a sensitive manner) to help our agricultural**

Newsdesk: 01622 695666 www.kentonline.co.uk

# Localism to mean more development, not less

by Alan Smith  
asmith@kentonline.co.uk

VILLAGERS hoping that a new government bill will give them powers to throw out unwelcome building developments had better think again.

That is not the interpretation of planning officers at Maidstone council.

Although the Localism Bill talks about pushing power down to the lowest tiers of democracy, with the use of referenda to decide local policies, that is not the way its going to work, a scrutiny committee heard.

**Condition**

Cllr Wendy Hinder told colleagues that many of her constituents in Boxley were hoping to use the Localism Bill to ban unwelcome development in the village.

Although the bill allows communities to draft their own local planning policies, called Neighbourhood Development Plans, the council's head of spatial planning, Michael Thornton, warned there was a condition.

He said: "It's a phrase you're going to learn to hate. It is that the NDPs must be 'in general conformity' with the council's core strategy. Otherwise the neighbourhood plans will never even be allowed to get to the referendum stage.

"What does general conformity mean? They are a set of words that will be picked over through the courts and argued over in appeals."

Mr Thornton said the localism agenda was about communities coming together to ask



**Maidstone Borough Council planning policy manager Michael Thornton**



**Cllr Wendy Hinder says constituents hoped to stop unwelcome developments**

for more development than that earmarked in the council's overall proposals.

Mr Thornton said: "That might mean a bit more employment enterprise, a bit more housing.

"What it doesn't mean is that a community can say 'no, we don't want what the core strategy says is our target figure'.

"It could mean more (growth), but it can't mean less."

**Obstacle**

If that wasn't enough, Cllr Clive English (Lib Dem) warned that, as things stood, most communities would be very unlikely to have the resources to produce a Neighbourhood Development Plan in the first place.

He said: "The NDPs are essentially similar to parish plans, and there have been very few of those come forward in recent years because of the obstacle now required of producing a sustainability appraisal.

"If that requirement is not lifted in the new Localism Bill then the whole idea of NDPs will be dead before they start."

■ **What do you think? Find out how to contact us on p2**

## 7.2 Housing & Sustainable Development

On 18 March 2011, the Overview and Scrutiny officer met with the Councils' Housing Enabling officer for Housing Policy and Development, Andrew Connors, to discuss the policies in place regarding sustainable rural housing.

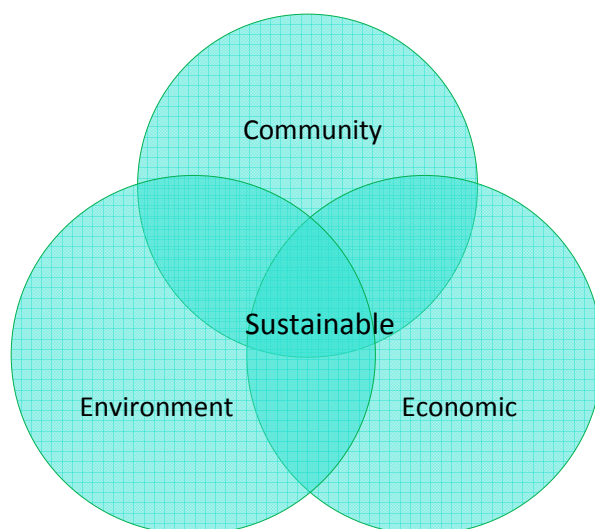
7.2.1 The Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) which was undertaken in Maidstone Borough in 2009, conforms to the major Government Guidance on the subject, and provides a wide ranging examination of the housing market, and part of the 'evidence base' on which a wide range of planning and housing policies can be based.

7.2.2 According to SHMA, the definition of 'affordable housing' includes social rented and intermediate housing, provided to specified eligible households whose needs are not

met by the market. 'Affordable housing' should be at a cost which is below the costs of housing typically available in the open market and be available at a sub-market price in perpetuity (although there are some exceptions to this such as the Right-to-Acquire). [There is an ambiguity in PPS3: Housing, where 'intermediate housing' is defined as being below market entry to rent, while 'affordable housing' is defined to be below the threshold to buy (normally much higher than the private rental one). But in principle the Guidance defines affordable housing as below the market threshold, and rationally speaking, that includes the private rented as well as purchase sectors].<sup>36</sup>

7.2.3 Often, the definition for sustainable development reflects a no 'one size fits all' approach. Sustainable development is a broad and complex field, and therefore many affordable housing providers define their own version of what they consider sustainable development to be. However, there are common key elements of sustainable developments which need to be addressed by all providers of housing, in order to successfully integrate and implement sustainable development principles. The Homes and Communities Agency also has a statutory duty to contribute toward sustainable development and good design and to improve the quality of the homes that they enable or in which they invest.

The below figure illustrates the three main facets to sustainability - community, the environment and the economy. These facets are in no way mutually exclusive. The integration of and balance between these areas will result in sustainability.



7.2.4 Maidstone Borough has a total of 41 Parishes, each containing expensive properties within villages and small towns; a reflection on the attractiveness of the Borough. However, this means that local people are unable to live locally, as they are priced out of the market, leaving young couples and families to move somewhere more affordable. There are 405 households identified in local housing need surveys, undertaken by Rural Housing Trust or Action with Communities in Rural Kent, who are in reported affordable housing need within the rural parishes of the Borough. There are rural schemes in the pipeline which will deliver 55 homes, therefore there is still a 350 homes shortfall. Some parishes have yet to see a scheme come to fruition to see their local residents affordable housing needs met.<sup>37</sup> The lack of affordable housing has a detrimental effect on the sustainability of the rural local community. Through the provision of affordable housing in rural locations, the Council can help local people remain in the village or town where they have strong family or employment ties.

<sup>36</sup> SHMA by Fordham Research Published March 2010

<sup>37</sup> Meeting with Mr Connors, Housing Enabling Officer. Figure up to date as of 22/3/11.

7.2.5 Now under new powers in the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008, more than 13,000 small rural settlements will be designated 'protected' areas across England. These will be areas where land to build new affordable homes is severely limited or where it is not possible to buy existing properties for shared ownership because of the small size of the housing market.

7.2.6 Shared ownership properties in these 'protected' areas will be retained by either restricting to 80 per cent the share owners can buy or allowing owners to acquire up to 100 per cent but ensuring the provider, for example a housing association, buys the property back to retain it for future purchasers. The below table shows the full list of protected areas within Maidstone.

Bicknor	Detling	Hollingbourne	Marden	Teston
Boughton Malherbe	East Farleigh	Hucking	Nettlestead	Ulcombe
Boughton Monchelsea	East Sutton	Langley	Otham	West Farleigh
Boxley	Frinted	Leeds	Otterden	Wichling
Bredhurst	Harrietsham	Lenham	Stockbury	Wormshill
Chart Sutton	Headcorn	Linton	Sutton Valence	Yalding <sup>38</sup>

**Recommendation: The Committee would like the Council to give encouragement for local affordable housing schemes in the rural communities. Ways of incentivising such schemes should be given**

7.2.7 The planned development and maintenance of sustainable communities underpins the Council's approach to rural areas, where the primary aim is to direct development to rural settlements that can best act as service centres for their surrounding hinterland.

7.2.8 Rural service centres play a key part in the economic and social functioning of the borough, and in contributing to its character and built form. They often act as a focal point for trade and services by providing a concentration of public transport networks, employment opportunities and community facilities, which minimise car journeys for those living in the service centres and surrounding areas. Therefore, development in the rural service centres is far more sustainable in the long term than indiscriminate growth of smaller rural settlements.

7.2.9 There are 5 designated Rural Service Centres in Maidstone (Staplehurst, Marden, Headcorn, Harrietsham and Lenham). The Council's draft Core Strategy policy CS4 notes that the vision for the service centres is that they will continue to be the focal points for their surrounding rural communities, where a pattern of infrastructure led development will be created that fosters economic and social vitality and ensures easy access to services and facilities for rural residents, thus reducing the need to travel by car.

7.2.10 Mrs Harrison, Rural Regeneration Manager from KCC informed the Committee that nationally policies were beginning to cite good practice including planning and economic development policies being more intertwined, and rural proofing policies becoming part of normal procedure. An example of where rural proofing was currently being done was at Medway Council.

<sup>38</sup> Briefing Note: Affordable Housing Key Issues, by Andrew Connors 2010.

7.2.11 Peter Hockney, Principal Planning Officer at Maidstone Borough Council was able to confirm on 21 April 2011 that he has 'looked at the policies from Medway and BNE27 (Re-use of Buildings in the Countryside) is similar to our re-use policy. I know Medway have had problems in the past as their policy does not refer specifically to tourism use as a commercial possibility and they have subsequently lost appeals for residential use. Our policy does have tourism built into it as a specific commercial option. In relation to policy BNE26 (Business Development in Rural Settlements) there is no saved policy comparable to this, although PPS4 (Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth) does allow for such development'.

7.2.12 The CLA produced a Position Statement in 2010 making four recommendations for areas to achieve sustainable development in a more transparent and flexible fashion.

7.2.13 The four recommendations focus on:

- sustainable development and planning policy;
- complexity and the impact on rural businesses;
- how to resource the planning system; and
- proportionality – reducing the regulatory burden.

7.2.14 To enable delivery of rural housing, the CLA encouraged planning policies that promote scale, good quality and architectural design within the diverse rural communities. This should support the economic activity with each individual area and promote renewable technologies to minimise any associated impact on the surrounding landscape and environment.



## 8. Communication & Marketing

### Tourism

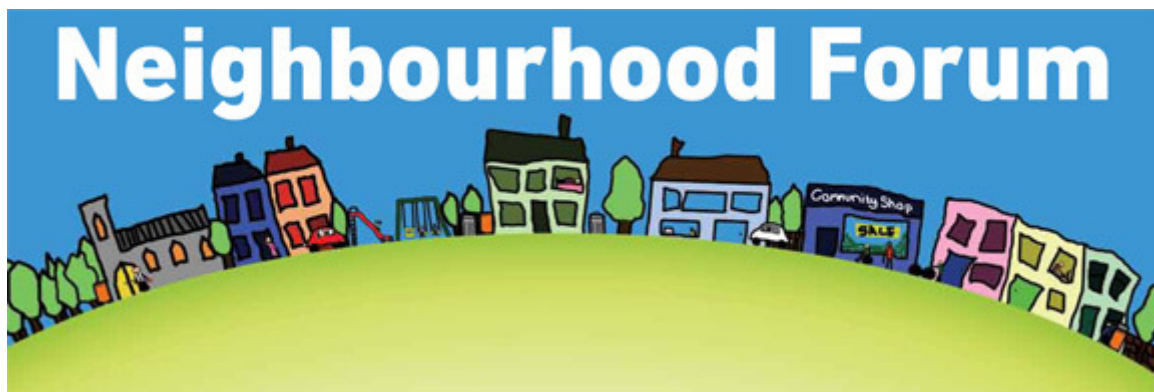
- 8.1 On 4 April 2011, a working group within the Committee met with Laura Dickson, Tourism Manager for the Council. They wanted to hear how tourism factors into the rural economy, and what the Council could do to proactively support this.
- 8.1.1 Mrs Dickson told the working group of a 'Hidden Britain' report which had recently been performed on Lenham. This was funded through a government grant (SEEDA) and assistance was offered to rectify any concerns subject to funding from the Council.
- 8.1.2 Signage was found to be a frustrating problem for the Visitor Economic Unit, due to the timescale taken to approve new applications (in some cases over a year), as well as mend damaged signs (one taking 18 months). Also, once a business ceased trading that sign was not removed, causing confusion amongst locals and tourists. Mrs Dickson explained that an application is sent to KCC Highways, who consult MBC to check that the business is legitimate, before KCC Highways erect the sign. It was thought that lack of funding is the cause for obsolete signs not being removed.
- 8.1.3 The minutes from this meeting are at Appendix C.



**Recommendation: Cabinet Member for Regeneration should pursue lobbying KCC Members to review the procedure for renewing and mending brown tourism signs.**

### 8.2 Neighbourhood Forums

As part of Maidstone Council's ongoing work with both the community and making efficient use of council staff, the Cabinet Member should review the possibility of adapting the boroughs neighborhood forums likewise, using Merton Council as an example.



8.2.1 The Council currently holds Neighbourhood Forum meetings, covering areas as follows;

- Central and North East
  - Wards - Allington, Bridge, East, Fant, Heath, High Street, North
  - Parish - Boxley (part of)
  
- Rural North and East
  - Wards - Bearsted, Boxley, Detling & Thurnham, Harrietsham & Lenham, Leeds, North Downs
  - Parish - Bearsted, Bicknor, Boxley, Boughton Malherbe, Bredhurst, Broomfield & Kingswood, Detling, East Sutton, Frinsted, Harrietsham, Headcorn, Hollingbourne, Hucking, Lenham, Otterden, Stockbury, Thurnham, Ulcombe, Wichling, Wormshill
  
- Rural West and South
  - Wards - Barming, Boughton Monchelsea & Chart Sutton, Coxheath & Hunton, Loose, Marden & Yalding, Staplehurst, Sutton Valence & Langley
  - Parish - Barming, Teston, Boughton Monchelsea, Chart Sutton, Coxheath, East Farleigh, Hunton, Linton, West Farleigh, Loose, Collier Street, Marden, Nettlestead, Yalding, Staplehurst, Langley, Sutton Valence
  
- South and South East
  - Wards - Downswood & Otham, Leeds, Park Wood, Shepway North, Shepway South, South
  - Parish - Downswood, Otham, Leeds, Boughton Monchelsea, Tovil

8.2.2 Forum membership is made up of county, borough and parish councillors, other service provider and community groups and these are primarily only for the residents of the respective areas.

8.2.3 These provide a good method of communication between residents and the Council, however the various business forums that are currently represented by retailers and businesses do not participate with the residents, which from time to time may be beneficial when needing to lobby local authorities on behalf of the community regarding issues directly affecting their companies or homes.

8.2.4 The Committee considered how the neighbourhood forums could be improved, and noted that Merton Council operates their equivalent of neighbourhood forums using a different technique. They hold 'Community Forums' annually during the autumn, to coincide with the council's budget making process which is resourced and supported by the Council. They are high profile events, with all local residents encouraged to attend and make their views on council and other public services known.

8.2.5 However, 'residents and ward Councillors in some forum areas are also continuing with community forum meetings during the year; organising, chairing and minuting the meetings themselves.'<sup>39</sup> In a report to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 31 March 2011, it was noted that Merton Council only provides a limited support to these meetings, in the form of free use of council owned meeting places and some help with

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.merton.gov.uk/community-living/communityforums.htm> [accessed 19 April 2011]

publicity. They do not provide servicing support, so residents and/or ward councillors service the meetings themselves.<sup>40</sup>

8.2.6 It was calculated that by functioning in this way Merton would save in excess of £45,000 a year<sup>41</sup> whilst remaining committed to enforcing community engagement. By developing the role of ward councillors as community champions, they work together with residents associations and other community organisations, and increase the use of social media as a means of involving residents, particularly younger ones.

**Recommendations: That the neighbourhood forum meets with the business forums from time to time to help lobby the council with issues as a community; The Cabinet Member Regeneration should review the possibility of adapting the boroughs neighborhood forums using Merton Council as an example.**

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<sup>40</sup> [http://www.merton.gov.uk/community-living/os310311community\\_forum\\_review.pdf](http://www.merton.gov.uk/community-living/os310311community_forum_review.pdf) [accessed 19 April 2011]

<sup>41</sup> [http://www.merton.gov.uk/community-living/os310311community\\_forum\\_review.pdf](http://www.merton.gov.uk/community-living/os310311community_forum_review.pdf) [accessed 19 April 2011]

## 9 Conclusion

- 9.1 The Committee found in their findings of this review that the economy has been changing quicker than the policies currently in place, many of which seem to lack an equal focus on both urban and rural aspects of the borough. Although it can be understood why policies are not always able to keep up in speed, there is no reason why the rural aspects should be excluded, or lacking detail when large focus is given to urban aspects throughout policies. The review found the CLA to provide a good example of how planning policies could be better placed to achieve this in a transparent, flexible fashion.
- 9.2 From desktop research regarding accessibility throughout the borough, it became clear that public transport is not user friendly for disabled passengers. As more emphasis is placed on carbon footprint and making better use of public facilities, it is evident that more work could be done by the train network providers to make improvements allowing for all platforms to be accessible to the disabled passenger.
- 9.3 With regard to the ongoing work on the Local Development Framework, the Committee believes that it is vital for the transport issues to be suitably addressed within the Infrastructure Delivery Plan and that the progress should be presented to the relevant Scrutiny Committee in the forthcoming municipal year.
- 9.4 When considering broadband within the borough, a large amount of information was provided for this review as work was already underway for accomplishing a better speed by 2015. Whilst the Committee were pleased to hear that the Council are already working very closely with KCC and BDUK it is important that progress reports are given to Councillors so that they can keep the public informed.
- 9.5 The Committee heard how the residents of the borough were not aware of the benefits of renewable energy, its commercial and community benefits, cost implications, and general importance for securing a greener future. Whilst the Planning Committee also need encouraging to approve similar applications, the Scrutiny Committee agreed that this topic needs attention as the borough strives to be a growing economy.
- 9.6 It was evident from the interview with Kent Downs and Marshes Leader Programme, that this service was not being utilised to its full potential in Maidstone. As this service will not be available after 2013, and is only for rural areas, the Committee are very keen to hear how the 'bank roll' service works in Cornwall Council so that if feasible, Maidstone Council can implement the same financial help to its' rural independent businesses.
- 9.7 Further desktop research found that neighbourhood forums in Merton Council were being used and sourced in a different way to Maidstone, which if implemented would potentially allow Councillors to be more pro-active and enforce community engagement.
- 9.8 The Committee identified the timescale of new or mended tourism signs as a particular issue; it became apparent that it is not clear why this takes so long, and why obsolete signs are not removed quickly. The Committee has made a recommendation that the Cabinet Member lobbys' KCC to review their procedure for this.

**What are the objectives and desired outcomes of the review**

- To determine which factors the Borough Council, in co-operation with its partners could influence in order to strengthen the rural economy;
  - To identify the impact of the Local Development Framework on the rural economy;
  - To investigate opportunities to develop appropriate planning and financial policies;
  - To determine whether there is a need for a rural economy strategy or a rural vision statement;
  - To determine whether the Council is undertaking the right activities to ensure a sustainable economic future for rural areas;
  - To identify the key challenges facing the rural economy and what support is offered to new businesses and existing businesses.
  - To identify potential funding sources for the development of the rural economy;
  - To identify marketing opportunities for Maidstone's rural economy;
  - To consider best practice to establish how to improve and support the rural economy, especially small businesses;
- And make recommendations as appropriate.

**What equality issues will need to be considered as part of the review – giving consideration to the 6 strands:**

Age, Gender, Race, Sexual orientation, Faith & Disability

whether opportunities offered by the Council for the rural economy are inclusive

**Which witnesses are required?**

- Economic Development Manager
- Association of Market Towns,
- National Farmers Union
- KCAS
- Kent Association of Local Councils
- Federation of Small Businesses
- Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- South East England Development Agency
- South East Rural Affairs Forum or South East Rural Board
- Representatives from various rural employers

**Other ways to seek evidence? E.g. site visits, involving members of the public, consultation.**

- External meeting in rural location;
- Workshops with rural employers;

**What information/training is needed?**

- Percentage of population living in rural locations
- Number and make up of businesses in rural Maidstone
- Information regarding the Rural Development Programme for England
- Government's rural strategy: [http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/documents/policy/strategy/rural\\_strategy\\_2004.pdf](http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/documents/policy/strategy/rural_strategy_2004.pdf)
- Improvement and Development Agency: How to help people into employment in rural areas: <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/19225448>

**Suggested time for review and report completion date**

- 6 months

**How does the review link to council priorities?**

- A place to achieve, prosper and thrive

**How does this item deliver CfPS effective scrutiny principles?**

- Provides 'critical friend' challenge to executive policy-makers and decision-makers
- Enables the voice and concerns of the public

**Any co-optees or expert witnesses?**

- Expert witnesses

**MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL  
MINUTES OF THE LEISURE AND PROSPERITY  
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING  
HELD ON TUESDAY 22 MARCH 2011**

**PRESENT:** Councillor Paine (Chairman)

Councillors Burton, Mrs Jenefer Gibson, Mrs Joy, Pickett, Nelson-Gracie and Mrs Smith.

**The Committee to consider whether all items on the agenda should be web-cast**

**Resolved:** That all items on the agenda be web-cast.

**Apologies**

An apology for absence was received from John Foster, Economic Development Manager.

**Notification of Substitute Members**

There were no substitute members.

**Notification of Visiting Members**

There were no visiting members.

**Disclosures by Members and Officers:**

It was noted that Councillor Burton declared a personal interest in agenda item 8 by virtue of his membership of the Marden Business Forum.

**To consider whether any items should be taken in private because of the possible disclosure of exempt information**

**Resolved:** That all items be taken in public as proposed.

**Minutes of the Meeting Held on 22 February 2011**

**Resolved:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 February 2011 be agreed as a correct record and duly signed by the Chairman.

**Rural Economy**

The Chairman welcomed Liz Harrison, Kent County Council Rural Regeneration Manager and Huw Jarvis, Kent Downs and Marshes Leader Programme Manager to the meeting, and invited them to present their report to the Committee.

Mrs Harrison summarised the work that had been accomplished over the past two years, and informed the Committee outlined some of the key headlines from the Kent Rural Evidence Base work (an ongoing research project). This has utilised the 2004, Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and Office for National Statistics (ONS) official urban and rural definition to produce specific rural datasets for Kent.

Mrs Harrison informed the Committee that 40% of Kent's businesses were located in the rural areas, and although it was recognised that farming was an important component, it was not the only industry in rural areas. Research had shown that there were many similarities between industries in the urban and rural areas and rural businesses generated £5.5 billion per annum to Kent's economy.

Mrs Harrison stated that by 2050 the world population was due to reach nine billion, with a 30% increase in food required. The food sector was particularly important for Kent and was worth £2.6 billion per annum. Growing concerns over global food security are leading to a reappraisal of the strategic importance of UK food production and in Kent a Food Sector Strategy is being developed.

In answer to a question Mrs Harrison informed the Committee that depending on the required levels of 'E-channels' it would be necessary to factor in that many rural areas and businesses have poor quality broadband provision.

The Committee queried the statistics that Mrs Harrison had mentioned regarding South Korea providing 250mb and asked if this was something the residents had to pay extra for, or was it considered the normal bandwidth to receive. Mrs Harrison stated that this was installed when South Korea had reconstructed its streets which enabled exchanges to be placed within many buildings. The Committee acknowledged this, and enquired into recent news that every medical library in the UK had a network already available for the public to use, and whether Mrs Harrison could elaborate on this. Mrs Harrison informed the Committee that as part of its pilot they were looking into utilising the Kent public network which provides broadband access to public sector buildings across Kent e.g. schools and libraries.

In answer to a question, Mrs Harrison stated that the issues surrounding transport in the rural area were hard to address due to the lack of resources in the transport infrastructure. However, as there is no specific rural strategy covering this, she advised the Committee to refer any transport concerns within the review to the 'Growth without Grid-lock strategy' and KCC's Highways team, and would provide the Overview & Scrutiny Officer with this document to circulate to Members.

The Chairman asked if live work units should be promoted via planning or whether the Council would be better advised to restrain from permitting this in rural areas. Mrs Harrison informed the Committee that KCC was currently undertaking research into the home based business sector and the potential for live-work. This was being undertaken by Tim Dwelly, a national expert in this field, who has published extensively on live work potential and concepts. Mrs Harrison explained that she would be happy to arrange for copies of these reports to be forwarded to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer. This work has stressed that live work needs to be specifically designed for home-based businesses rather than simply placing a desk in the corner.

To date, the research has highlighted that between 2001 - 2009 there was a 12.5% increase in home working within Kent. Mr Dwelley's draft report advised local authorities to take a brave approach and encourage it as a means to grow the economy. His final report will provide guidance for what Kent should be achieving for the future.

The Committee noted this and stated that the recent field trip accentuated the various sizes of business within the boroughs' rural areas, and asked if Mrs Harrison was aware of other initiatives currently being pursued by other local authorities that would benefit Maidstone. Mrs Harrison informed the Committee that nationally policies were beginning to cite good practice including planning and economic development policies being more intertwined, and rural proofing policies becoming part of normal procedure. An example of where rural proofing was currently being done was at Medway Council. The Committee noted this and suggested that this be investigated further as part of the review. Mrs Harrison highlighted a recent OECD

report commissioned by DEFRA had emphasised the importance of planning and economic development being a joint approach whilst the Food, Agricultural and Horticultural Business Growth event held in January had highlighted rural business concerns over perceived inconsistencies and proportionality issues regarding planning policy across Kent. In particular, there was growing concern from the business community planning policy needs to keep abreast of changing business requirements to ensure that the sector remained competitive and productive.

The Chairman enquired into the relationship between Mrs Harrison's department and the councils Economic Development team, and how often do they meet. Mrs Harrison stated that although KCC's rural team was small, the connection with Maidstone Borough Council was impeccable, as the team are very proactive and forthcoming. The Chairman expressed his delight at this news, and informed the Committee that Mr Foster, Economic Development Manager had sent his apologies as a sporting injury had prevented him from attending. The Committee stated they would appreciate Mr Foster's views on the topic in a written response.

Mr Jarvis gave a summary of the work he was involved with concerning the Leader Programme. He explained the geographical areas that his section covered and what the Leader programme can do for rural Communities, for example the £1.8million funding available for projects. In answer to a question Mr Jarvis confirmed that this was only available to rural areas.

He explained how the membership was set up within the Local Action Group (LAG), and the each member stood for two years. Mr Jarvis explained that a member from Shepway Council represented Dover, Ashford, Shepway and Canterbury and that a member from Swale Council represented Medway, Maidstone and Swale. The Committee expressed a keen interest in Maidstone becoming a representative for the forthcoming 2 years. Mr Jarvis welcomed this and informed the Committee that further information would be provided via the Economic Development team.

Mr Jarvis stated that regardless of providing presentations on the leader programme in Headcorn, and other various locations, Maidstone had received funding for 5 projects out of the 30 in the Kent Downs and Marshes area. The Committee enquired why, in Mr Jarvis' opinion, Maidstone had not submitted more plans for projects. Mr Jarvis explained that the biggest obstacle was the upfront funding required from the applicant. Although the programme would match 50% of the funding required (up to £50,000), many applicants did not have the funding upfront to support this. He gave an example of a local authority who had created a 'bank roll' service, whereby they provided the funding upfront on a 0% interest, and they received the funding back within two months. The Committee were very interested in how this local authority, Cornwall, made this work and requested further information be provided with a view to consider this as a way forward. The Overview and Scrutiny Officer advised the Committee that Corporate Services Committee should also partake in the decision to provide a 'bank roll' service.

Mr Jarvis also highlighted another obstacle that applicants frequently met with regards to obtaining written confirmation from planning that no planning permission was required on the site concerned, as this was possibly taking longer than necessary. The Committee agreed this could be frustrating and would consider this as part of the recommendations found within the rural economy review.

The Committee noted that the information within the covering report and the Kent Rural Delivery Programme showed no future plans after 2013, and queried if this was due to no funding being available then. Mr Jarvis confirmed that the programme was due to finish in the summer of 2013 due to lack of funds.



In answer to a question, Mr Jarvis informed the Committee that the National Farmers Union, Swale Borough Council and Chamber of Commerce had advertised the programme particularly well which was a reflection of the amount of projects submitted in that area. The Committee stated that they would be very accommodating with any assistance required with advertising within Maidstone, using tools such as the 'Downs Mail'. It was noted that both the Communications and Economic Development team could liaise together with Mr Jarvis to achieve this.

The Committee asked both Mrs Harrison and Mr Jarvis their opinion on what Maidstone Borough Council could do to help the rural economy. Mrs Harrison suggested that whatever outcomes materialise from the review, that it feeds back into the planning and economic policies. Mr Jarvis reiterated the need for a 'bank roll' service and quicker process for obtaining proof that no planning permission is required.

- Resolved:** That Mrs Harrison and Mr Jarvis be thanked for the information and it be recommended that:
- a) The Communications Team and Economic Development Team work together with Mr Jarvis to promote the Leader Programme within the borough;
  - b) Mr Jarvis provides an example of bank rolling used in Cornwall, to be circulated to the Committee;
  - c) It be suggested that Maidstone be nominated as a representative for the next two years as part of the Leader Programme;
  - d) Mrs Harrison provides the documents as suggested throughout the meeting as part of the ongoing work with the review, and these be circulated to the Committee;
  - e) A closer look at Medway Council regarding planning policies and inclusion of rural proficiencies be undertaken and circulated to the Committee;
  - f) A definition of working from home and business at home be provided and circulated to the Committee;
  - g) Pre-existing broadband provisions within medical libraries be explored and explained to the Committee; and
  - h) Mr Foster provides a written response to the Committee due to his unavoidable absence.

## **Field Trip 14 March 2011**

## Appendix C.

- 1.2 The first place on the itinerary was Castle Farm in East Farleigh. Mr Checkley is the owner of this farm which produces mostly pears and apples. They have been able to secure a 80/20 deal whereby fruit is sold to supermarkets and they received 80% of the payment in return, albeit some 12-18 months after the hard work is complete. Unfortunately, only 5% of the price of the fruit is a reflection of the fruit growing processes. The 95% reflects the cost of logistics and administration. Although the re-planting should take place every 15-20 years, they are struggling to do this due to lack of capital funding. They recruited between 20-30 local residents for the harvest time, but currently hold no staff due to finances. They had received planning permission for a wind turbine earlier in 2011, which was thought to provide enough energy to allow them to not need fossil fuels and an income of circa £8-10,000 per year. However a covenant on the land restricted this to be erected, as the previous owner living on the land was able to dispute the wind turbine being a 'reasonable development'. After talking to the owners of Castle Farm and to Darran Potter from Distributed Generation Ltd, the Committee realised there is a need to promote education about the need for and role of renewables in the rural area – both as ways to help businesses lower their carbon footprint as well as become more economically stable.



- 1.3 The Committee continued to Pattenden Lane in Marden, and stopped at Scarab Sweepers, who build and export sweepers for both national and international markets. The group were escorted throughout the facilities with a clear description of what tailor-made sweepers the company are able to build. With a total of 150 Scarab employees and 44 welder fabricators they are able to build customised chassis of all makes of sweepers according to client specifications, both national and international. Although certain sweeper parts come from Europe, the vast majority come from within the UK, including 50-70 tonnes of steel every four weeks. Scarab's rural location can be a hindrance in this case, where bad weather and poor road conditions sometimes cause delays in the delivery of raw materials. This is also the case for staff commuting from various locations in Kent, as public transport connections are not extensive.



During the visit, it was established that the Council only has two Scarab sweepers, (the other vehicles are from Johnsons Sweepers). The group were able to see the new model Scarabs were working on, and it was discussed that perhaps the Council could provide a test run, with the view to support the local business, and rent or purchase future sweepers from Scarab.



1.4 Just around the corner, the group visited Claygate who manufacture bathrooms for retailers. They anticipated growth when they built their new facilities, which also included provisions for recycling water, glass which retains heat, air-conditioning which also controls the heating, low energy and sensed lighting as well as a generator which is used frequently for maintaining adequate electricity levels. Although they have 91 employees, they have a low turnover due to good quality staff facilities that are provided, giving them a high sense of belonging, worth and value to the company. Car sharing is frequently used for commuting to work and the majority of employees are able to walk to work. The main challenge they face is being able to recycle things such as wood. Although they are contemplating investing into a biomass boiler, there are no business recycling points in Marden and it is a common problem throughout the area.

1.5 Burtons Medical Equipment in Marden manufacture, service and sell goods to 80% veterinary and 20% human medical practices. With 80 employees in total, only half are on site, as part of the maintenance service means that employees will go to the product to fix the problem. As part of the fast service, modern technology is used with the procedure for paperwork, as a camera on the pen allows the information to be sent directly to the office, allowing a quicker payment method, and a quick solution to queries. Like many other businesses in Marden, they are able to recycle everyday materials such as cardboard, and have a generator which allows production to continue amid power failure.



1.6 The group were able to converse with some members of the Marden Business Forum, to establish what their concerns were and what they hoped the Council may be able to assist with.



1.7 Our next visit on the itinerary was the Haven Farm Shop in Sutton Valence. The new owners had recently been nominated for the 'Best Retailer' category in the Taste of Kent Awards, and came third against two large establishments. Their sales have increased by 30% when comparing 2009 figures to 2010, and currently they are not receiving a wage and do not hold any staff. Although they have been facing difficulty with conditions concerning the products they sell, this problem was unknowingly inherited when they bought the farm shop and they are currently seeking guidance from the Council concerning this matter. The main challenges they face are connected to products they can sell, as they realise that many people would not like to do extra trips to the farm shop to obtain goods, and therefore would like to be able to sell other goods so that people can obtain all grocery style foods within the one venue. For example, oranges, bananas and dates which are not grown in the UK, are a top seller when bought along side local free-range eggs, local made ciders and ready meals.



The main challenges they face are connected to products they can sell, as they realise that many people would not like to do extra trips to the farm shop to obtain goods, and therefore would like to be able to sell other goods so that people can obtain all grocery style foods within the one venue. For example, oranges, bananas and dates which are not grown in the UK, are a top seller when bought along side local free-range eggs, local made ciders and ready meals.

1.8 Our visit to Lenham's Pippa's Tea Room enabled us to talk to another small independent business who had been there for a substantial time. Like many other businesses, their problems arise during the bad weather, when people are not able to get to them as road conditions make it unsafe. Also, there was a perception that pedestrians were not able to venture out as the venue in a rural area means that the pavements are not cleared as frequent and therefore makes it more costly to be open.



The last visit on our itinerary was Court Farm, in Thurnham. This dairy farm has been a family run farm for 16 years, only employing 1 person. They currently have 130 cows, which is relatively low compared to previous years when farming was more stable, and it is low compared to the average successful dairy herd. Each cow produces a high yield of approximately 40-50 litres of milk per day. This is sold for 25p per litre, which is only just about enough to survive (ideally, the dairy farmer needs to earn 30p in order to cover costs and invest in his/her business). The owner is concerned about the rising price of fuels (and shrinking margins) and has plans to put solar panels on one of the barns, which would create a source of heating and reduce utility bills. However, the roof currently holds asbestos and needs to establish a safe way to overcome this problem. Another obstacle to overcome is the capital to invest in the solar panels. Although grants are available, this isn't always achievable. The cows are 'loose housed' although milked and fed twice a day. They recycle the water from the cows faeces as this provides nitrogen for watering the fields, therefore renewable energy is sought from every possible angle.



Vandalism has previously been an issue in the area but this could be due to being a rural area without much security. With the Olympics looming, it is thought perhaps some income can be provided via tourists and campers.

## **Leisure & Prosperity Overview & Scrutiny Committee Informal Meeting**

### **Rural Economy review**

**4 April 2011**

Present: Councillors Mrs Joy, Mrs Gibson and Nelson-Gracie;  
Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Christina Chemsí; and  
Tourism Manager, Laura Dickson.

#### **Item 1 Interview with Christine Dier, Assistant Economic Development Officer**

It was noted that Mrs Dier had sent her apologies due to illness and Mrs Laura Dickson, Tourism Manager was able to present the working group with information.

Mrs Dickson informed the working group that there was an audit on Lenham tourism by Hidden Britain, who produced a report that was funded by a government grant (SEEDA). This report detailed the aspects of tourism which needed to be addressed, and assistance was offered to rectify any concerns subject to funding from the Council. This report was to be sent to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer, so that the Committee could ascertain what challenges were established and could be a focus point for other rural parishes. This report also showed a link to the Hidden Britain web site, where case studies illustrating the Hidden Britain programme could be explored.

In answer to a question, Mrs Dickson informed the working group that brown tourism signs were causing some frustration. This is due to the timescale taken to approve new applications (in some cases over a year), as well as mend damaged signs (one taking 18 months) and once a business ceased trading that sign was not removed, causing confusion amongst locals and tourists. Mrs Dickson explained that an application is sent to KCC Highways, who consult MBC to check that the business is legitimate, before KCC Highways erect the sign. It was thought that lack of funding is the cause for obsolete signs not being removed. The working group noted this and suggested that as part of the review, MBC would lobby KCC Members to review this procedure.

Mrs Dickson highlighted that Cycling is a major industry for tourism in the rural areas, as this could be done on the road or cross-country.

The working group asked about the possibility to obtain temporary permits for caravan or camp sites in light of the Olympics 2012. Mrs Dickson stated that although that may have been feasible, the applications would need to be submitted now to allow for the process of assessment to take place in good time before 2012. The assessments that take place as part of the 'star rating' was undertaken by either the AA or Visit Britain. Mrs Dickson highlighted that those entering the UK via the Channel crossing would be expected to stay in Maidstone and its surrounding areas on various campsites, and that the Ferry bookings were already very full with group passengers. Mrs Dickson highlighted the potential to lose regular visitors during the Olympic season, as prices may increase and regulars may choose to 'set up camp' elsewhere, and was keen to make sure this did not happen.

In answer to a question, Mrs Dickson stated that caravan sites are usually busier than cottage lets during the course of a year. It is assumed that this is due to it taking approximately 3 years to establish a holiday let business, especially as cottages tended to be busy for only 6 months a year. However, as self catering holidays and budget hotels were becoming more popular, Bed and Breakfast establishments were closing down.

Mrs Dickson informed the working group that the 'Heart of Kent Holiday Guide' had been disbanded. This was a catalogue detailing accommodation, walks, itineraries including things to see and do which has now subsequently been made available on-line. However, during February-March 2011, they had received hard copy requests from the public totalling 19,000 which was 4,000 more than the previous year. Although this guide was self-funded, the promotions and distribution of the guides was funded by the districts concerned. In answer to a question Mrs Dickson stated that the only district who had made a decision on how to go forward was Sevenoaks. MBC was until this time, still undecided whether to combine with the magazine publication of 'Visit Kent' or not. Mrs Dickson was able to confirm that an iPhone app entitled 'Visit Maidstone' was due to be published soon.

The working group made a reference to the TV adverts associated with visiting parts of Great Britain, and questioned if there was one for England. Mrs Dickson stated that there was, although this was not aired in England itself, and recalled the 'Enjoy England' campaign.

Mrs Dickson was asked for her opinion as to why people visit Maidstone. Mrs Dickson stated that the Kent wide events encouraged visitors to stay in Maidstone, although it was not just the visitors who are being accommodated at these times, but also the employees and tour organisers. Mrs Dickson gave some examples, using Brands Hatch, Open Golf in Sandwich, Leeds Castle, County Show Ground and the International Mini Owners Club to name a few.

Duration of meeting: 9.30-10.30am.