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To: Regeneration and Economic Development Policy Overview
and Scrutiny Committee, 23rd September 2011

Subject: Feedback Report from REDPOSC Rural visits

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: The report provides an overview of the recent rural visits by REDPOSC and outlines the key issues identified.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At their meeting on the 24th June, REDPOSC identified that rural would be a priority focus for the forthcoming year. Two visits were arranged for the 1st and the 2nd September to provide an insight into a range of rural issues.
- 1.2 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the recent visits, set out the key issues raised and identify areas for possible future consideration.

2. Visits to Projects/Sites

- 2.1 Members were taken on a tour by Action with Communities in Rural Kent (the Kent Rural Community Council) to a range of projects that they had helped facilitate. Action with Communities in Rural Kent is a community development organisation providing information guidance, training, networking opportunities and other support to community groups, small businesses, social enterprises, parish and town councils and other organisations to help rural communities identify and address their needs.
- 2.2 The day was themed around examples of the 'rural big society' as rural communities have a long history of developing their own solutions and social enterprises to meet locally-identified needs.
- 2.3 **Elham Post Office Outreach**
An example of a post office outreach concept – where post office services are available in a community without a permanent Post Office on certain days of the week. The Elham example operates from the Kings Arms Public House and provides an invaluable service for older members of the community and a range of local businesses.
- 2.4 The Kent Action for Rural Retailers (KARR) programme is sponsored by Kent County Council (following the loss of Defra funding in 2007) and works to prevent the unplanned closure of village shops and post offices. To date,

Action with Communities in Rural Kent has been able to successfully reduce the number of unplanned post office closures through the KARR initiative by finding alternative locations, identifying new shopkeepers/subpostmasters, supporting the development of community run shops/post offices and facilitating the development of outreach services.

- 2.5 To date the initiative has supported more than 150 retail businesses to continue to serve the communities in which they are located.
- 2.6 **Key findings**
It was concluded that the scheme is clearly generating hidden savings for health and social care providers through enabling vulnerable and older members of the community to continue to live independently – especially delaying entry to full-time care. Further research would be of value to highlight and quantify these indirect benefits generated by KCC's £16K annual investment in the scheme.
- 2.7 It was also raised that the co-location of shop and postal services in facilities such as the local pub created mutual benefits for these businesses.
- 2.8 **Community Owned Shop – Barham**
This community shop was set up with support from the Kent Rural Access to Services Programme (RASP) (a SEEDA funded initiative) and KARR and is managed by local volunteers. Following the loss of their local post office, the local community were supported in setting up the Nailbourne Community Store Association to provide local access to groceries and postal services. The community raised most of the funds, aided by KCC member grants and a small RASP grant.
- 2.9 A further 4 community village shops have been established across Kent in areas (along social enterprise models) where running a commercial operation is no longer economically viable. Although the Rural Access to Services Programme has now finished, a basic support service has been maintained through the KARR initiative.
- 2.10 **Key findings**
The importance of allowing the community to develop the skills and take real ownership of community projects was discussed. It was highlighted that the Kent community shop scheme was inspired by best practice in Oxfordshire and the lessons learnt within that scheme had indicated that where community shops are 'gifted' to the community rather than developed 'hands-on' by the community they are likely to fail.
- 2.11 The community shop has created a real focal point for the community – especially for older residents and is now completely self-sustaining.
- 2.12 **Goodnestone: Local Housing Scheme**
Facilitating the development of affordable rural housing to meet local business and community needs is a key objective of the Kent Forum's Housing Strategy. The Kent Housing Group and Kent Rural Board have

developed a new cross-County Protocol to help deliver affordable local needs housing in rural parts of Kent and Medway.

- 2.13 The Protocol aims to encourage a consistent, pragmatic approach to affordable rural local needs housing development across the County. It provides advice and guidance on issues such as identifying local need, acquiring suitable land and engaging and working with local communities to overcome any barriers to new housing on exception sites.
- 2.14 The Goodnestone scheme, which is currently under construction is a development of 8 units on an exception site previously owned by Dover District Council. The development of the scheme was brokered by ACRK's Rural Housing Enabler Service, which included undertaking a local needs survey and working with Goodnestone Parish Council, the local community and English Rural Housing Association.
- 2.15 **Key findings**
The scheme being developed has been designed to be in keeping with local styles and the quality is in keeping with market-led housing provision.
- 2.16 The importance of good engagement with the community throughout the process was stressed – as local opposition can often present a key barrier to the development of such schemes. It was highlighted that no planning objections, even from neighbouring properties, were received for the Goodnestone Development. Both the Kent Forum Housing Strategy and the Rural Housing Protocol have stressed the importance of the ACRK's Rural Housing Enabler Service in bringing rural schemes forward.
- 2.17 **Wealden Wheels Community Transport Scheme**
Wealden Wheels is a community-owned transport scheme, serving 6 parishes and provides transportation for people that public transport does not reach. Support has come from a variety of sources – including Kent County Council, a former EU regeneration fund that KCC administered (Mid Kent LEADER +) and ACRK.
- 2.18 The scheme is run by volunteers and raises income from parish precepts, grants and local fund raising efforts. They currently have 24 volunteer drivers, although recruiting drivers remains an ongoing challenge. Due to current legislation, they operate as a car club with 140 members rather than running scheduled services.
- 2.19 **Key Findings**
It was raised that further consideration should be given as to whether such schemes could be developed in other parts of the County. A number of other initiatives were discussed, including the Sheppey Wheels scheme (which Wealden Wheels helped mentor) and the work of the Thanet Community Transport Association.
- 2.20 **Funding Buddies Project and Hawkinge Allotment**
The Funding Buddies project was set up by ACRK in 2006 to mentor

communities in developing their own community-run projects – especially where local groups were new to fundraising and lacked the necessary confidence or know-how to apply for funding and manage community projects.

- 2.21 The programme is currently funded by the Big Lottery and has been identified as a national exemplar for community capacity building. Although it was originally set up as a rural programme, the scheme now operates across Kent's rural and urban areas. Other areas including Cumbria, Gloucestershire and Essex are looking to replicate the scheme.
- 2.22 The scheme has 28 specialist volunteer funding advisers (mentors) who have different areas of expertise – i.e. sports, arts, heritage, social health. A mentor is assigned to each group to help them identify the need and shape the project, identify suitable funding streams and advise on the bid writing process. They also provide advice on setting up social enterprises and other types of fund raising avenues e.g. how to approach local businesses etc.
- 2.23 The Hawkinge Allotment project represented just one of the 510 projects supported by Funding Buddies, where the community had been successfully supported in applying for £40,000 of Lottery funding to set up allotments for local residents. The community had had no previous grant funding experience and lacked the confidence to approach funders and submit grant applications.
- 2.24 **Key Findings**
The Funding Buddies project has raised over £18 for every £1 invested for community projects in Kent. There is a need to consider how Kent could build on this project further – especially in developing Big Society style projects.
- 2.25 KCC member grants are particularly helpful in helping to provide match due to the flexibility of what they can fund.

Finding the right community champion is key to bringing forward successful projects – but they also require a level of expert support to help them plan and implement their projects and, ideally, to be networked with those who have already taken forward successful similar schemes.

- 2.26 **The importance of Kent's food sector – 2nd September**

Rumwood Green Farm

Members were taken to Rumwood Green Farm, Langley. Rumwood Green Farm specialises in soft fruit and apple production. The business also packs fruit for local growers and distributors.

- 2.27 Considerable investment has been made in the site in recent years, especially in the packhouse, which is considered essential for supplying and meeting the standards set by UK supermarkets.

- 2.28 Members were taken around the packhouse, fruit storage facilities and to see strawberries being grown in table-top cultivation systems under polytunnels.
- 2.29 **Key Findings**
Issues raised included the importance of polytunnels for commercial soft fruit production, the current dependency of the sector of migrant labour (especially through the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme), the reluctance of local people to consider employment within the sector (despite there being many skilled and high value jobs) and the wider economic impact of the sector.
- 2.30 Areas for further work identified included the need for better local data to demonstrate the linkage and multiplier effects of Kent's horticulture and agriculture sectors and the importance of better careers advice to attract young people into the sector.
- 2.31 **East Malling Research**
East Malling Research specialises in horticultural and agricultural research. The centre used to be government-owned but has now been externalised from Defra and operates on a commercial footing.
- 2.32 East Malling has developed an international reputation for its plant breeding work, with almost 90% of global apple production using the East Malling 'rootstock 9@ developed at the centre. Due to the development timescales for developing new apple varieties, a renewed focus is being placed on soft fruit development i.e. strawberries. Currently over 100 scientists are employed on East Malling's plant breeding research programme.
- 2.33 Pest and disease research is another critical area of research for East Malling. EU pesticide regulations have reduced the number of traditional pesticides and fungicides available to growers, whilst climate change has increased the risk of new pests and diseases affecting crops. East Malling is working to develop new biological controls to address some of these challenges.
- 2.34 East Malling has also undertaken successful trials into reducing water consumption for growing strawberries and potatoes. Researchers have shown it is possible to produce one tonne of Grade 1 potatoes using just 23 tonnes of water – significantly less than the current 42-60 tonnes industry average for the same yield. They are now working with Kent strawberry growers to apply the findings of the strawberry research into commercial production systems.
- 2.35 Members were taken to see apple storage research work and the concept pear orchard sponsored by Sainsburys. Through growing pears on a range of cordon systems, the latter has demonstrated a significant increase in both crop yield and quality.

2.36 **Key findings**

Concerns over food security has re-emphasised the importance of horticultural and agricultural research to increase the productive capacity and resilience of the sector to new pests and diseases.

- 2.37 The withdrawal of core Defra funding and privatisation of the UK's agricultural and horticultural research institutes has led to the closure of many dedicated facilities across the UK. The expansion and development of R&D capacity at East Malling will be key to ensuring that the UK's national capability on this important agenda is maintained.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 The above visits provided a helpful insight into some of the key issues facing Kent's rural communities and the land-based sector. There are opportunities to build upon this programme at future meetings by examining some of these areas in greater depth and the workstreams being undertaken to address key concerns i.e. the Kent Rural PLC initiative and the Kent Rural Housing Protocol implementation.
- 3.2 In addition, there is also an opportunity to undertake additional visits, for example to Hadlow College and to a community broadband initiative.
- 3.3 At the culmination of the visits, officers will bring together all conclusions for this Committee to consider

4. Recommendation

- 4.1 The Committee is asked to note the report and discuss the key issues and findings arising from the rural visits.

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Background Documents:

The Kent Rural Housing Protocol