

Rural Cambridgeshire: Ensuring a Vibrant Future Consultation on a new Rural Strategy for Cambridgeshire



Report on the Rural Strategy Consultation Event held on Tuesday 8 September 2009 at Isleham Village Hall

This event was supported by Cambridgeshire Together, the commissioner's of the new Rural Strategy for Cambridgeshire, and the East Cambridgeshire Strategic Partnership

INTRODUCTION

Organised by Cambridgeshire ACRE on behalf of Cambridgeshire Together and the East Cambridgeshire Strategic Partnership, this event is one of a series of District-based workshops allowing local people to give their views on the development of a new Rural Strategy for Cambridgeshire.

A detailed rural evidence base of national, regional and local data has been compiled and consultation has been based around the emerging themes from this research. All attendees were encouraged to read a brief 'Summary of Evidence' before attending the workshop in order that they were fully prepared to contribute their thoughts and views on its conclusions.

OVERVIEW OF THE EVENT

A total of 41 people attended the event; a good mixture of representatives from local government (Parish, District and County Councils) and other statutory bodies (such as the Police and NHS Cambridgeshire) and community groups, businesses, land managers, faith groups and arts groups. A full attendee list can be found in Appendix 1.

The workshop programme was structured to maximise the amount of time spent in interactive sessions thus giving participants a good chance to discuss both the broader issues and to focus in on particular topics of interest. The outputs from these sessions will be used to inform the development of the new draft Rural Strategy. The Strategy will be accompanied by an action plan with timescales and responsibilities for delivery clearly set out so that its achievements can be monitored.

The event was led by Kirsten Bennett, Chief Executive of Cambridgeshire ACRE and facilitated by Nigel Boldero, an independent consultant, whose company 'Community Renewal' is experienced in community consultation.

REVIEW OF THE INTERACTIVE SESSIONS

Interactive Session 1 – What are the right strategic priorities?

In the first interactive session participants were asked to consider whether the priorities identified through the initial research for each of the three thematic areas were the right ones for rural East Cambridgeshire and also whether there were any further priorities that needed inclusion.

- **Living in the Countryside:** Participants concurred that the chosen priorities were the right ones and particularly focused in on availability of affordable housing as a key local priority, recognising that currently planning policy is having a damaging effect on the sustainability of smaller villages. Access to education at a higher level (e.g. 16+) was also picked out as a key priority.
- **Economic Wellbeing:** Participants agreed with the priorities chosen under this theme but felt that more needed to be done to attract companies/employers into the area to increase the supply of suitable jobs for local people and that more mentoring support for local businesses was needed. Further development of tourism was seen as key with particular emphasis on longer-stay tourism (as opposed to day visitors) and more exploitation of the area's waterways.
- **Land and Environment:** Whilst participants felt the priorities chosen are broadly right, there was a feeling that they should also include ensuring fuel security and stopping food wastage. Adaptations in response to climate change and also to increase local food security are seen as key, as is improving the links between green areas and encouraging more healthy pursuits such as walking and cycling.

Interactive Session 2 – Answering the big questions and finding the solutions

In the second session participants focused in on particular priorities within the three thematic areas and examined potential solutions.

- The full listing of participant responses to the questions under the theme of **Living in the Countryside** can be found in Appendix 2.
- The full listing of participant responses to the questions under the theme of **Economic Wellbeing** can be found in Appendix 3.
- The full listing of participant responses to the questions under the theme of **Land and Environment** can be found in Appendix 4.

Anybody wishing to contribute more detailed input, particularly to those questions their workshop table did not examine, is encouraged to complete the online consultation survey which can be accessed via the Cambridgeshire ACRE website – www.cambsacre.org.uk.

Interactive Session 3 - Marketplace

During this session, each table fed back the key points from its discussion to the rest of the room. Participants were then asked to consider everything they had heard and discussed about the different strategic priorities under each theme and to vote for the three they thought had most importance and relevance for East Cambridgeshire. Based on the percentage of votes received, the top three priorities for East Cambridgeshire are:

- Availability of affordable housing (12.7%)
- Accessibility to services, work and training (12.7%)
- Decline in rural services such as shops, pubs and post offices (11.8%)

FEEDBACK FROM ATTENDEES

Attendees were asked to complete an event evaluation form. These have been analysed and a summary of the results is given below.

How would you rate the overall quality of the event? (Scale 1 – 5 where 1 = Poor and 5 = Excellent)

86% of participants gave the workshop a score of either '4' or '5' and the organisers are satisfied that the format and scope of the consultation worked well.

What did you really enjoy and what could have been done better?

Nearly everyone commented on how much they had enjoyed the stimulating table discussions and the chance to mix with and talk to people from different communities/organisations. A couple of people felt the venue could have been improved upon and two people commented that some on-table facilitation might have helped discussion along.

How relevant was the event to your work?

76% of attendees felt the event was 'very relevant' to their work and the remaining 24% felt it was 'fairly relevant' to their work. This demonstrates to us that the event had been pitched at the right audience and advertised appropriately.

Has the event provided useful new learning for you? If so, what in particular?

Many people commented that the event (and pre-reading) had increased their local knowledge about the issues affecting our rural communities. The chance to hear about issues from other people's perspectives appealed to many participants. A number of parish councillors, in particular, commented that it had reinforced their understanding and role in the local community.

How confident are you that the new Rural Strategy will help ensure a vibrant future for Cambridgeshire? (Scale 1 – 5 where 1 = Not at all confident and 5 = Very confident)

Only 34% gave a score of '4' or '5' indicating that they are confident that the Rural Strategy will help ensure a vibrant future for Cambridgeshire. Unfortunately, 66% gave a score of '2' or '3' – a less positive response to this question. Several participants commented that the Strategy is only a first step. Agreeing actions to be taken and actually implementing them will be the true mark of a successful strategy. Past experience makes people sceptical that change will happen.

Thanks again to all those who took part.

The outputs from this event will be fed into the development of the draft Rural Strategy which will then be launched for a further 12 week period of public consultation. All participants in these initial workshops will be invited to take part.

Appendix 1 - Attendee List

Firstname	Surname	Job Title	Organisation	E-mail
Debbie	Adams-Payne	Vice Chairman	Little Downham Parish Council	debbie@adamspaynesafety.com
Carl	Atkinson		Cambridge Housing Society Limited	carl.atkinson@cambridgehs.org.uk
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Thora	Blonal		Care Network Cambridgeshire	admin@care-network.org.uk
Nigel	Boldero		Community Renewal / Audax Design	nbold@lineone.net
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Philip	Eden	Chairman	City of Ely Perspective	elybltc@aol.com
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Mary	Hancock	Emneth and Marshland St James	Ely Diocese	mhancock@waitrose.com
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Julie	Weekes	Business Services Assistant	Cambridgeshire ACRE	julie.weekes@camsacre.org.uk

Appendix 2 - Outputs from Interactive Session 2 – Questions focusing on Living in the Countryside

Question 1 Evidence tells us that more affordable housing is needed in the small villages and settlements of Cambridgeshire. How can we increase the amount of affordable housing in Cambridgeshire's rural settlements?

- Education of parish councils.
- Compulsion for parish councils to support development where there is a housing need.
- Empowering communities so that they have some control over availability of land – community land trusts.
- Relax planning policy to develop in smaller rural communities.

Question 2 Population forecasts for Cambridgeshire predict continued growth and a shift towards an older age profile and a lower children population. Are the implications of more older people and fewer children in our villages and settlements being adequately addressed in terms of housing and care needs, schools and the viability of other services? What needs to be done differently?

- More shared ownership housing to support young families to remain in village.
- Move away from care homes – enable older people to remain in homes.
- Enable families to live in the villages they grew up in, in order to support older family in the same area.
- Need to look at sustainability of schools.

Question 3 Levels of deprivation in Cambridgeshire are not equal across the board. Some areas rank more highly than others on deprivation measures such as prosperity, health, education and fuel poverty. In addition, the sparse population in some areas means that deprivation is hidden. What more can be done to address rural deprivation in Cambridgeshire?

- Instead of expanding market towns (Soham/Littleport), build up some of the larger villages. This could give rise to more local shops/jobs. Attract industry and reduce travel. Larger villages will be able to support medical/education needs, etc.

Question 4 The national decline in rural services (shops, pubs and post offices) is being felt in Cambridgeshire as much as in any other part of the country. What opportunities are available to maintain/increase service provision within rural communities e.g. pubs, garages, shops and post offices, etc? Are you aware of any innovative schemes and solutions to rural service provision? What role can community buildings play in accessing key services in the future?

- Assistance to fund community shops opening.
- Multi-service outlets – community co-ops (allotments, post offices, pubs).
- Community car schemes and community transport brokerage.
- Mobile shops / services.

Question 5 Lack of access to adequate transport provision is a major issue for residents in rural areas, impacting on their ability to access services (where there is no local provision) and even travel to work. How can we improve access to transport? What might the local solutions be and what role could community-based transport play in the future?

- More co-ordination of information on transport options and of transport currently available.
- Maximise choice.
- Bring services into the community.
- Encourage communities to develop local transport solutions.
- Use G2G card on public transport.
- Community transport and brokerage.
- Improving bus services.
- Demand responsive transport linking to main bus routes. Needs kick-start funding but can become self-sustaining.
- Change in legislation means community transport can operate proper bus routes.

Question 6 Under the law, eligible Parish Councils have a ‘power of wellbeing’ which permits them to do anything which they consider is likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, social, or environmental well-being of an area. This might include such things as saving and supporting local assets such as shops, pub or post office, or providing medical/health centres, a mobile library, meals on wheels or making local grants. Are parish/town councils and other community groups receiving adequate support to develop their capacity to influence plans and policies, to acquire and develop their own assets and to provide some services more locally? What further support do they need?

- Further training support needed as this seems to be patchy.
- Amalgamate smaller parish councils (consortiums) to give better facilities.
- Funding information point, assistance with plans to support local shops/pubs, etc.
- Some form of parish MOT to look at and develop improvements.

Question 7 There are health inequalities in Cambridgeshire by location, gender, ethnicity and deprivation. In addition, ‘distance decay’ results in people making less use of healthcare services the further they are away from their provision and this is a significant problem for the most rural parts of the county. Is enough being done to promote healthier lifestyles in rural areas? Does anything need to be done differently to provide better access to healthcare and health information? How can communities and healthcare agencies work better together and develop innovative solutions to health inequalities?

- Promotion of services at local level and less centralised provision of services.
- Development of flexible local community buildings to be shared by agencies with each agency providing a range of services.
- More investment in health visitors.
- More joint work at secondary school level.

Question 8 Recent research tells us that approximately one in ten residents in Cambridgeshire have taken part in a civic activity in the last twelve months. Do you think there is equality of opportunity for all members of the community currently to contribute towards and play an active role in their community? What do you consider to be the key barriers to people being able to play an active role and how could these be broken down?

- Yes but its patchy. The issue regarding young people being involved is their perception of the role. Find way of breaking down this barrier – for example, ‘shadow a councillor’.

Appendix 3 - Outputs from Interactive Session 2 – Questions focusing on Economic Wellbeing

Question 1 Evidence shows there is a need to raise the level of skills and educational attainment of local people to support the rural economy. What are the main barriers/threats faced by rural individuals when they seek to raise/maintain their skill levels through education and training? How can a greater number of young people be encouraged to remain in rural areas with weaker economies?

- Adequate training facilities essential.
- Access
- Cost
- Job availability
- Parental support
- Access to fast broadband
- Grant access
- Affordable housing.
- Home working
- Rented accommodation
- Access to appropriate local courses.
- Advice and support
- Varied leisure/entertainment facilities
- More school based vocational courses essential to encourage young people to become the skilled workers of the future.
- Proper training facilities to be provided locally with improved transport facilities.

Question 2 Central to rural Cambridgeshire's economic success is the ability to attract, retain and develop a workforce with the right skills to meet business needs and the provision of suitable workspace for business growth. Is there a sufficient skilled and available labour force for businesses to grow and develop without having to move away to larger urban centres? Are there sufficient workspace and business premises available at affordable rents for businesses to develop?

- Not at present enough skilled employment locally but there are a large number of people educated to NVQ 4 who out-commute.
- Incubation centres for varying businesses including high tech are helpful but do not currently cater for craft-type businesses.
- Provision of more affordable business spaces including use of redundant farm buildings and home-working with better broadband access.
- Shared resources – admin, finance, catering, cleaning, etc.
- Yes, we do have the workforce however we don't have the jobs to keep the workforce in East Cambridgeshire.
- There isn't enough speculative space available. There is also an infrastructure deficit that needs addressing.

Question 3 Market Towns are essential hubs for service delivery and the rural economy. What support services need to be located in our market towns to support the populations both in the towns and in the surrounding rural hinterlands? Do our Market Towns provide sufficient heritage and cultural appeal to act as foci for encouraging the development of tourism? Could more be done to encourage visitors? Is enough being done to offset the impact of recession by addressing the issue of vacant shops and attracting shoppers?

- Post office facility/service could be in a village hall.
- Health – access to health services and information and guidance.
- Police presence.
- Meeting spaces – community assets.
- Education - access to information and guidance.
- Access to advice – ideally a one stop shop in every market town.
- Transport links.
- No, they don't provide sufficient heritage and cultural appeal. More could be done to encourage visitors. More quality accommodation.
- Make more of waterways.
- Maximise on proximity to Cambridge.
- No big flagship event – Ely Festival?
- More support for culture/cultural economy.
- Lack of cultural venues.
- Need to join up cultural assets and cross-promote.
- Soham and Littleport need more help. EEDA should do more for market towns. Strategic work is happening across the three market towns but, apart from Ely, very little practical work is happening in Soham or Littleport.

Question 4 Policy suggests there needs to be great recognition of the ways that economic growth can enhance community sustainability, especially providing opportunities for people to work near where they live. Can business support/other services be better marshalled to facilitate enterprise and entrepreneurial development? Is enough being done to support the use of new technologies to promote rural economic development? Has enough been done to support social enterprise and other options for improving job opportunities and the financial strength of families and communities?

- Specific mentoring for specific industries, e.g. high tech, creative, vocational, voluntary, recreation and tourism.
- Faster broadband essential.
- Quicker response to create provision of new supplies at new premises.
- Use of online social networking.
- Support for local adult education using local schools/colleges.
- Advice to encourage more self-employment.
- More opportunities to socialise other than in local pub, e.g. sport, creative arts, dancing.
- Creation of time banks.
- Greater use of mobile enterprises.

- Lack of knowledge about business support available. More investment at grassroots level rather than top down.
- Good broadband coverage in place. Internet could be better used - more support to develop and link websites.
- No – more specialise advice needed.

Question 5 The future of the financial and environmental sustainability of the food and farming sector is in question with significant changes in agricultural commodity prices and in elements of policy which is likely to have a visible impact on the way Cambridgeshire's countryside is managed. Are there opportunities for value added production and farm diversification activities through developing current activities? Should we be encouraging local supply chains between farmers/food producers and local communities? What needs to be done to make this successful?

No table addressed this question at this workshop.

Appendix 4 - Outputs from Interactive Session 2 – Questions focusing on Land and Environment

Question 1 Building on the environmental assets of the Fens, there are ambitious habitat restoration projects proposed that will return intensively-farmed land back to native wetlands for nature conservation, education, countryside access and tourism. Is sufficient weight being given to green space planning to cope with the recreational needs of a growing population? Could more be done to develop the Cambridgeshire countryside as a high quality visitor destination and a usable asset for local people?

- No, insufficient weight being given to green space planning. Need more political buy-in – demonstrate benefits (of Wicken Fen Vision). Get LSP involved to endorse Wicken Fen Vision and others, e.g. Ely Country Park.
- Yes more could be done - need to play on uniqueness of Fens. Lots of work done, e.g. 'Visit Cambridgeshire'. Maybe look at cycling promotion. Margins agreements with land owners to help accessibility. Improve waterways for visitors. Link into Masterplans. Look at wild camping.
- Good strategic direction, e.g. regional, Cambridgeshire Horizons but needs to be pushed at local level now within District Council planning frameworks.
- Need to look at county as a whole.
- Importance of connectivity.
- Do we need more bigger 'blobs' to be able to get away to quieter areas.
- Awareness of local assets needs to be raised by all avenues.
- Accessibility of bigger 'blobs' sustainably crucial.
- Opportunities to exploit wider markets, e.g. cycle routes around county.
- Need a well-known celebrity to promote benefits.
- Need financial incentives to landowners to increase green corridors including grant conditions.
- Monies should be made available for infrastructure developments and S106 monies.

Question 2 Rural areas have a significantly higher carbon production rate per person than urban areas. This is principally due to greater emissions from heating homes and use of transport. Are the likely effects of climate change in Cambridgeshire being addressed in plans for future development and other investment decisions?

- Yes, but still not stipulated as planning regulations and needs to be.
- Investment decisions – some evidence, e.g. staff to look at climate change.

Could more be done to help rural communities and businesses consider climate change adaptations?

- Yes – would like to see parish-level projects to enable renewable energy to power villages. More grants of professionals to support communities. Rate relief for businesses – look at the benefits. Interest free / low interest loans. Procurement procedures could be changed.

To what extent should local assets and the countryside be given over to the production of energy (e.g. wind power, bio fuels, etc) and how can the impact of this be minimised?

- Need to look at multiple-use of land. Locally could use wood which would be good for habitat diversity and employment.
- Look at what best suits that community.

- Bio-fuel / food debate – more complex. Demonstrate benefits and trade off.
- Locking carbon into soil (less deep ploughing). Soil management.
- Water storage – need to look at where we can retain water from winter months to release for summer months.
- Education and raising awareness at every level especially at older people.

Question 3 Major growth in houses, businesses and related infrastructure and human activity is probably the principle influence on how rural Cambridgeshire's land and environment looks and performs now and into the foreseeable future. Are plans for growth being used effectively to combat trends which are affecting the decline of rural services and the viability of rural areas? Are sufficient measures being taken to minimise the impact of new development on environmental quality?

No table considered this question at this workshop.

Question 4 To maintain future food security our food must be reliable and resilient to shocks and crises and be produced and brought to market as sustainably as possible. Ensuring food security must sit alongside other priorities such as tackling climate change and securing a healthy natural environment. Is enough being done to forge new connections between local food and farming so as to promote the profitability and sustainability of both sectors? What will the effects of climate change be on the way food is produced in Cambridgeshire and how can environmental sustainability be achieved in the longer term?

- Promote farmers' markets and local produce.
- Not certain what is being done now – need to identify grant assistance.
- Awareness building of benefits of local food. More encouragement of mixed farming and orchards. Add variety to production.
- Avoid monoculture to increase biodiversity.
- Need to bridge gaps between supermarkets and suppliers, supply chains and pricing problems.
- Health of community important for food production.
- Need flexibility in range of crops being grown.
- Farming community very tradition and need flexibility to change/adapt.
- Raise awareness of farmers for future generations.
- Importance of peat in Fens – reducing too much. (NT can supply information)
- Planting of hedges to prevent peat blows.
- Using technology – irrigation needs to be managed properly to reduce shortage of water.
- Flood storage benefits – retain water for future use.
- Must reduce food miles to deliver environmental sustainability.
- Supply of local produce to schools, hospitals should be encouraged.
- Fuel production needs to be balanced against food production.
- Food wastage must be cut.
- Make best use of technology to ensure land used to full potential.
- Choice of fuel crops important and price conflicts between food and fuel production.
- Local food important and closely linked to green infrastructure. Both important to local economy, tourism and for health benefits.