

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



Report on the Rural Strategy Consultation Event held on Thursday 17 September 2009 at The Oasis Centre, Wisbech

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

INTRODUCTION

Organised by Cambridgeshire ACRE on behalf of Cambridgeshire Together and the Fenland 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 40 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 and land managers. 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 Fenland and also whether there were any further priorities that needed inclusion.

- Living in the Countryside: Attendees were broadly supportive of the identified priorities. Additional priorities identified included tackling fuel poverty; tackling fear of crime; instilling a sense of community; and reducing our carbon footprint.
- Economic Wellbeing: In addition to those priorities already identified, participants noted a number of additional priorities that they felt most important for Fenland. These included: Addressing the transport structure for the Fenland area; Gaining a better understanding of the untapped economic potential of tourism in the Fens; Ensuring fast broadband connection for all to support increasing levels of entrepreneurship; and Capitalising on the assets Fenland has such as cheaper housing, cheaper planning and development, water and space.
- Land and Environment: Addressing the potential impacts of climate change was considered the most important priority for Fenland given that it is below sea level. As agriculture remains a major employer for the area, any impact on farmland would severely affect the local rural economy. Fuel poverty was identified as a missing priority from those identified so far, along with better 'marketing' of the rural area and the need for greater cultural and general education of local people about their local area and placing a value on it.

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 Fenland. Based on the percentage of votes received, the top three priorities for Fenland are:

- Accessibility to services, work and training (17.8%)
- Decline in rural services such as shops, pubs and post offices (11.1%)
- Supporting communities' engagement in self-reliance and self-governance (11.1%)

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)

96% 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?

Several participants commented on the quality of the Summary of Evidence provided before the event and how it had increased their knowledge on the issues under discussion. The group-based interactive sessions were a hit with all participants, who felt they allowed all individuals to contribute equally.

Several people would have liked longer to allow for more in depth discussion.

How relevant was the event to your work?

65% of attendees felt the event was 'very relevant' to their work and a further 30% 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?

A number of attendees commented about how the event and pre-reading had increased their knowledge generally on the issue affecting rural Fenland. One participant was particularly impressed by the strength of feeling shown by attendees for their pride in the local area.

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)

No score of '5' were awarded but 48% gave a score of '4' indicating that they are confident that the Rural Strategy will help ensure a vibrant future for Cambridgeshire. Unfortunately, 52% gave a score of '1', '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
Di	Atkinson	Partnership Development Manager	Fenland District Council	datkinson@fenland.gov.uk
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Nigel	Brown	Business and Community Planning Manager	Fenland District Council	nbrown@fenland.gov.uk
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Firstname	Surname	Job Title	Organisation	E-mail
Chris	Stevens	Oasis Centre & Trust Manager	Wisbech Community Development Trust	chris@theoasiscentre.co.uk
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Owen	Winters	Parish Councillor	Little Downham Parish Council	NO EMAIL

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?

- Need to identify local needs.
- Need the support of the parish council.
- Identify exception sites which can only be developed for local affordable housing.
- Enable local employers to access housing for employees.
- Community land trusts – holding land for the benefit of the community.
- Needs to be community-led not planning-led.

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?

- How is need assessed to justify services? Dial-a-ride for example. If there is a service it may get used if people see it operating. However, it will only serve a village if need/demand is identified.
- Should new housing be planned for elderly people with warden-type system to free up current houses for families? Group not convinced that it is necessarily as big an issue in Fenland.
- Schools in villages seen as important to attract families.

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?

- Neighbourhood management to address specific community issues.
- Partnership working – sharing resources and service delivery.
- Build in community cohesion, systems of support when needed.
- Resources for people on fixed incomes for servicing and compliance.
- Raise aspirations – generational step change – increase educational attainment and future opportunities. Keeping young people in the area.

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?

- Community buildings are key as a focus point.

- Can pubs be used as community buildings? Some investment needed but a partition is cheaper than a new building.
- Are there existing houses/buildings that could be bought as community buildings, e.g. book cafe in Murrow uses old church school building.
- Main difficulty in using these buildings is that the buildings are not necessarily adequate and some services take time to set up.

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?

- Community car schemes.
- Care share schemes.
- Co-ordinating the existing bus network to work together.
- Moped schemes.
- Subsidised transport for people in full-time education.
- Demand responsive transport.
- Can services be staggered to enable transport to be better linked to give better vehicle utilisation. Can this be done through travel plans, changes in school hours, etc?

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?

- Parish Councils gaining more power but no additional funding therefore not able to deliver on big issues. Struggle to influence larger organisations/authorities. Mechanisms required to do so, e.g. parish plans.
- Not sufficient support - requires more funding. Funding to be delegated to parishes for specific services.
- Power of wellbeing to be promoted as a concept.
- Develop volunteer capacity.
- Stronger voice of parish council – right to be consulted.
- Reward effective parish councils.
- Sharing effective practices.
- Do more to create community cohesion.
- Need access to appropriate technical knowledge if to make decisions at parish level.

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?

- Reprioritisation of Cambridgeshire resources linked to indices of deprivation.
- Leadership within partnerships for health promotion.
- Develop better means for health service to be delivered, e.g. mobile and outreach services and using existing venues more creatively.
- Better integration of services – a priority for NHS Cambridgeshire us to provide better access. Main players should work together better.

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?

- Lack of sense of community.
- Organisations in place that 'run the community'.
- Depends on where you live.
- People need encouragement – how do we do this?
- People need to know how to get involved.
- Communication is key to improvements, e.g. websites, access to information at libraries, GPs, etc.
- Clarify what will be discussed.
- Information provided in good time to be able to digest and promote.
- Improved educational attainment may improve engagement.
- Recognise the different skills that people have.
- Adapt communications to meet varying audiences.
- Openness in decisions.

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?

- Provide taster courses and improve transport links to enable students to get to training. Community rail project? Better use of school transport? Ensure training course fit in with benefits.
- Ensure skills provision can be done locally so that people don't have to leave the area to learn.
- Increase opportunities for decent employment. Open their eyes to what is already available, e.g. apprenticeships, work experience and business mentors. Also targeted inward investment to bring in quality jobs. Use organisations like fire service to motivate young people and increase their aspirations.

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?

- Available, yes, but not indigenous. How can the migrant workforce be used to build the economy and motivate the local population?
- Need for role models in business – build links between schools and businesses.
- Encourage businesses to grow their own workforce – workplace training.
- Those that are relatively skilled but who have been made redundant may lack basic skills such as reading and writing that they need to be able to apply for new jobs.
- High quality mid-sized business accommodation needed.
- Up skill local people and this will encourage them to remain locally.
- Fenland is not creative enough with its buildings. More space available but it is not being utilised at present.

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?

- Keeping existing village schools. No further loss of post offices. Doctors surgeries and chemists. Efficient transport services. Libraries including mobile services with fast book turnover. Community police and local fire stations. Services for young people, parent and the elderly. Leisure services and churches.
- Need to promote the area – leaflets to promote where to go and what to do, what local events planned around the time of year. Targeted information about local events through websites. Need to find the local area's USP.
- Education through the media – positive messages via television or celebrities. Attract businesses into the area by providing incentives.

- Improved co-ordination and cohesion – who are Business Link?
- Empty shops should be used to showcase art and to advertise forthcoming events. Free parking should be retained.

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?

- There is a lot of good working already going on but we need to spread the word so more people hear about it.
- Technological connections don't exist in some areas. Bring the 21st century to all of Fenland by improving broadband speed.

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?

- Farmers need to rethink about crops and to change some practices.
- Open local abattoirs. Less red tape. Restrictions on imported meat.

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?

- Recreation needs of all ages must be considered.
- Working is being done by individual organisations/volunteers but there isn't enough joined-up partnership work being done at a higher governmental level. No money being invested into organic farming by government or supermarkets.
- Loss of food producing land could be counterbalanced by training supermarket staff in how to properly handle fruit and vegetables; less wastage (more funny shaped veg on the shelves); H&S rules result in massive wastage. Increase food prices to encourage less wastage – currently one third of food goes in the bin.
- Dumping and fly-tipping is an increasing problem as better access to the countryside is provided.
- Natural play should be encouraged – need a more away from provision only being in sanitised green areas.
- Improve provision for cyclists and increase number of circular walks / cycle ways. Improve support in Fenland for tourism.
- In terms of improving the area as a visitor destination look at making better use of waterways for boating and watersports, make more of local wildlife areas and consider accessible tourism for the disabled (ideal, as local area is so flat). Fenland needs its own tourist identity (separate from Cambridge). Need a museum of the Fens – focus on history of drainage of the Fens, food production, archaeology of Roman sites and windmills.
- The amount of acreage taken up by the two current major projects (Wicken Fen and the Great Fen) will have a negative impact on food production and the economic impact generated from these projects will not balance this. Is the balance between ecology and food production properly weighed given our present knowledge?
- There are not enough recreational opportunities into the countryside for local residents – the possible use of marginal land should be considered.
- The emphasis on 'Wetland Fenland' should shift to present day Fenland land use.

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

- Still building on areas that are likely to flood in the future – greater investment in flood defences needed.
- Investment in the railway is needed – would reduce carbon emissions.
- Increase information sharing across communities – best practice initiatives for carbon adaptations. Look at grant aid and tax breaks for companies adapting to climate change.

- Bio-fuel production uses fuel and isn't the solution its sold as being. Cannot take a 'one size fits all' approach to deciding what proportion of countryside to turn over to the production of energy.

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?

Not considered by any group during this session.

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?

- There are too few connections between local food and farming. Possible developments could be community markets using existing rural facilities with some (all?) of the profit returning to the community and promotion of the growing and cooking of fresh produce.
- Soil deterioration and reduced rainfall will result in necessary changes in crops grown (monoculture being replaced by diversification), agricultural practices and culture.
- Managed retreat will need to be considered as well as water scarcity (both drinking water and for agricultural use).