

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



Report on the Rural Strategy Consultation Event held on Wednesday 9 September 2009 at Bluntisham Village Hall

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

INTRODUCTION

Organised by Cambridgeshire ACRE on behalf of Cambridgeshire Together and the Huntingdonshire 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 37 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 Huntingdonshire and also whether there were any further priorities that needed inclusion.

- Living in the Countryside: There was broad agreement that the priorities already identified are the right ones. Access to education, particularly at a higher/further education level, was picked out as a specific priority. Attendees also highlighted the need for better public transport, services for young people and access to information, e.g. publicising what community resources are available.
- Economic Wellbeing: There were no additions to the priorities already identified.
- Land and Environment: Attendees thought that water usage was an additional priority that needed consideration. Also addressing invasive species and planning around future problem species.

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

- Availability of affordable rural housing (14.7%)
- Decline in rural services such as shops, pubs and post offices (14.7%)
- Accessibility to services, work and training (13.3%)

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)

78% 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?

Many attendees noted how much they had enjoyed the round table discussions and the range of different exercises. Several commented on how well the session was organised and the pace at which it moved. Many also commented how much they appreciated the chance to network with others and hear their different views. One person singled out the quality of the evidence base for comment.

A couple of people felt the time allowed for discussion in one of the sessions was too long and another felt the areas under consultation were quite broad.

How relevant was the event to your work?

67% of attendees felt the event was 'very relevant' to their work and a further 28% 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 people commented on the diversity of issues impacting on rural areas.

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 22% 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, 78% 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
John	Alford	Councillor	Perry Parish Council	margaretalford@aol.com
Kirsten	Bennett	Chief Executive	Cambridgeshire ACRE	kirsten.bennett@camsacre.org.uk
Nigel	Boldero		Community Renewal / Audax Design	nbold@lineone.net
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Andy	Chapman		Luminus Group	andy.chapman@luminus.org.uk
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John	Craig	Service Development Manager	Huntingdonshire District Council	john.craig@huntsdc.gov.uk
Steve	Criswell		Cambridgeshire County Council	steve.criswell@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Mike	Davey	Service Director: Community Engagement (Fenland)	Cambridgeshire County Council	mike.davey@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Nigel	Finney	Group Director of Housing Services	Luminus Group	nigel.finney@luminus.org.uk
Chris	Gerrard	Great Fen Project Manager	The Wildlife Trust BCNP	chris.gerrard@wildlifebcnp.org
Gill	Hanby	Children & Young People's Active Involvement Manager	Huntingdonshire District Council	gill.hanby@huntsdc.gov.uk
Jean	Harnwell	Vice-Chair	Sutton Parish Council	jeanharnwell@aol.com
Mark	Hodgkinson	Leader+ Partnership Manager	Cambridgeshire ACRE	mark.hodgkinson@camsacre.org.uk
Chris	Jablonski	Environment Team Leader	Huntingdonshire District Council	chris.jablonski@huntsdc.gov.uk

Firstname	Surname	Job Title	Organisation	E-mail
Samantha	King	Environmental Management Officer	Huntingdonshire District Council	samantha.king@huntsdc.gov.uk
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Cathy	Taylor	Economic Strategy and Partnerships Officer	Cambridgeshire County Council	cathy.taylor@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

Firstname	Surname	Job Title	Organisation	E-mail
Gemma	Tuohy		Cambridgeshire Constabulary	gemma.tuohy@cambs.pnn.police.uk
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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?

- More promotion/use of exception sites.
- Review threshold for new developments to maximise affordable housing.
- Restricting land use for affordable housing only.
- Policies on types of unit even for private developments.
- Lifetime homes – disability-friendly, flexible accommodation.

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?

- Delivery of services could be done differently – utilising existing buildings such as schools/village halls.
- Planning and development of housing to reflect the needs of an ageing population and property that can meet a wider range of needs, i.e. bungalows, flats, level access.
- Location of village halls that can provide good vehicle access and off street parking.
- Design features such as accessible toilets and walls that can be moved – to provide longevity of use of same home, i.e. easily adapted as needs change.

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?

- Implement and rural proof Cambridgeshire Health Inequalities Strategy; Equality Strategy; Cambridgeshire Engagement Strategy; Hunts CYP Involvement Strategy and Transformation Strategy.

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?

- Cambourne – house police/GP/etc in one building.
- Co-operation between local businesses.
- Multi-agency events to promote local initiatives and services.

- Village halls could market their facilities and agree a pricing structure with neighbouring villages to ensure fair share of potential business.
- Cambridgeshire ACRE could co-ordinate a website with links to village halls.
- Village halls can give discount to 'locals' and promote block/regular bookings by giving discount – first x bookings free, etc.

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?

- Economics dictates solutions.
- Carrot and stick – comfort of car vs use of public transport. (more carrot, less stick needed, e.g. car sharing incentives and priority parking for sharers).
- Commuted-based transport initiatives have been tried but viability continues to be the barrier. Not the solution for commuting.
- Dial-up mini-bus services can work.
- More government-led – e.g. RAF Wyton – lots of MOD employees travelling in one car.
- Bring back the school bus.
- Local people would like to cycle to next town to get public transport link or access shops etc. but country roads have no footpaths let alone cycle paths. Public rights of way across countryside need to be better signposted and maintained.
- Reliability of advertised services should be closely monitored and changes to timetables advertised clearly.
- Buses take a 'scenic' route via lots of villages to town and the length of time the journey takes makes travel to work impossible.
- Lack of evening and weekend services.
- Organise small groups who are able to book in advance for trips using Dial-a-Ride. Difficulty is the lack of flexibility and unable to be spontaneous.
- People do not know about community transport schemes and Community transport schemes do not know who to contact to advertise their services.
- Hospital transport can be problematic, especially if needed in emergency or if disabled and often long waits or no transport at all.

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?

- External supported needed to kickstart and support projects.
- Restart Parish Plan process.
- Issue around restrictive, prescriptive, difficult to access funding streams, e.g. S106 money.

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?

- Not aware of what is already happening but promote 'grow your own', healthy diet education, allotments, making people more aware of statistics (e.g. lower life expectancy in Fenland).
- District nurses, local healthcare visitors, drop-in sessions at village halls.
- School programmes to promote gardens, allotments and include the community.

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?

- Competing priorities particularly for families and working people.
- Resources?
- Statutory surveys don't include under 18s.
- Young people and others don't respond to 'adult models' – models need to be more people friendly.
- Young people and other need support to engage beyond consultation – who does this? Who has skills? What skills are needed? Who pays?
- Feeling that nothing changes as a result.
- Mobility – people go out of village to socialise.

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?

- Finance
- Access to training
- Ability of establishment to train people in the right skills needed.
- More affordable housing
- Transport
- Community facilities
- Retention of pubs/shops
- Opportunity to work locally.

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?

- Enough skilled workers but wrong sorts of jobs in our market towns – people living in town commute outside, e.g. London/Cambridge – need to attract right sort of jobs.
- Not in rural areas hence out-commuting.

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?

- Better public transport networks required – villages do not have reliable services.
- Support services – education, medical, farmers markets.
- Saddened by loss of TIC – more information needed, better signposts/interpretation of historic character
- Introduce 'free' car parking days.
- Events in town centres.
- Marketing opportunities needed to encourage retailers.
- Town Centre Partnerships

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?

- Creation of enterprise centres in key locations where support and training can be provided are talked about but no action yet in more rural areas.
- Broadband access needed everywhere for access to internet for job seekers and for businesses.
- Not aware of any support for social enterprise.

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?

- Hunts is only part-Fen – green infrastructure is needed across the whole district.
- Need to think about doorstep green space for all rural communities, including villages that aren't growing.
- Sufficient weight exists but there is no clout behind the various plans and policies that exist.
- Demise of Fens Tourism – nothing in its place.
- Gateways to towns – Huntingdon, Ramsey, St Neots and St Ives from the waterways.
- Local distinctiveness – district/county/landscapes – we should be able to do more.
- HDC countryside wildlife site leaflets – very well received – do it again.
- Increase capacity of countryside attractions.
- Only market Cambridgeshire as a visitor destination on certain things as significant amount of countryside is not particularly attractive.
- More can be marketed effectively, e.g. rivers, waterways, villages.
- Circular walk/cycle routes needed.
- Very few country parks
- Community orchards
- Accessing areas very difficult unless private cars used.
- Insufficient opportunities for inner city children to access the countryside.
- More joined up partnership working between organisations.
- Better use of brownfield sites.
- More cycle paths along rivers.
- Better use of existing recreational and sports facilities.
- Encouragement of different sports not just football and cricket.
- Ignorance of benefits of activities, e.g. skate parks.

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?

- No – building standards are not good enough/enforceable.
- Reliance on the car unlikely to change.
- Water resources uncertain at best.
- Building on floodplains.
- Fens Tourism 'Visit the Fens' website is being removed. EA pages will replace some of the content but some good work will be lost.

- Quality of accommodation needed improvement, e.g. accreditation and eco-standards.
- Great Fen and other places offer multi-functional land use such as biomass.
- Need a range of solutions.
- Windpower is possible across Hunts – need to consider biodiversity conflicts and landscape.
- We are cynical about bio fuels, but energy from agricultural waste is good.
- Grants, broadband improvements, car sharing clubs

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 – growth is centred around market towns.
- Building regulations / Homes and Communities Agency grant regime.

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?

- Land will be lost through flooding and salination.
- Market food more effectively.
- Loss of peat.
- Reduction in food miles.
- More markets/local food outlets.
- Allotments/community gardens.