

# BRAG Annual Activity Review 2010/11



**The following document outlines some of the key BRAG activities and outcomes in the past year, demonstrating its role in supporting the rural agenda in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. Whilst the current environment is a challenging one, particularly in relation to Central Government policy reviews and feeling the full effects of austerity measures, BRAG has continued to champion the cause for rural communities across the county during 2010/11.**

Locally, rural issues and opportunities for intervention remain. Many of the challenges identified in the existing Rural Strategy are unchanged; a continued erosion of accessible service provision, patchy public transport, the effects of out-commuting, housing affordability and barriers to the retention of younger generations are all ongoing concerns. However, new issues have also come to the fore; the potential wide-reaching effects of HS2, the growing demand for improved broadband connectivity and the very real effects of the recession and public sector austerity, in relation to unemployment and a reduction in service delivery. The need to articulate the importance of these rural issues is as strong as ever.

Whilst the emergence of 'Localism' and the 'Big Society' has seen a change in focus, particularly from a policy perspective and the vision for local authority service delivery, the proposed increase in community empowerment and the implications of the National Planning Policy Framework review also present possible opportunities. This may allow rural areas to have an increased level of ownership and the ability to define local aspirations for development, sustainability, asset management and community integration. Such tools could be vital if rural communities are to face these challenges and maintain a prosperous future.

On this basis, BRAG is taking the first steps in the development of a new Rural Strategy for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The existing family of reports was launched in 2008 and has proven to be an integral tool in championing the rural agenda, shaping policy and articulating the value of rural communities. With the life of the current document coming to an end, combined with the emergence of new issues and changes in Government policy, a new Strategy will be the focus for ensuring the county's rural communities get the best deal.

# Activity Overview:

## BRAG Conference 2010

The 4<sup>th</sup> Annual BRAG Conference, in partnership with Milton Keynes, took place on Monday 29<sup>th</sup> November 2010, at the Doubletree by Hilton Hotel, Stadium MK. The event was hosted in collaboration with the LEADER Rural Economic Development Programme, encompassing rural Aylesbury Vale and Milton Keynes.

The theme of the Conference was focused on the continued growth of new communities and employment opportunities in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes as well as the development of infrastructure projects and the impact on associated rural communities. The Conference also provided an opportunity to showcase local projects and success stories, as well as providing more information about relevant funding streams. The event provided a platform from which BRAG could develop and strengthen its relationship with Milton Keynes Council, which continues to be a long-term supportive partner. The event was extremely well-attended, with approximately 70 delegates present from a wide variety of backgrounds including rural stakeholders, councillors, farmers, local authorities and the voluntary sector.

The Conference featured a series of speakers, headlined by Councillor Andrew Bowles (Chairman of the Rural Forum South East) as well as a host of other contributors such as Sir Henry Aubrey-Fletcher (BRAG Chairman), Dr Ann Limb (Milton Keynes Partnership), David Hill (Milton Keynes Council) and Richard Harrington (Aylesbury Vale Advantage), Miranda Carter (HS2 Ltd). Crispin Davies also articulated his experiences with HS1/Channel Tunnel rail Link in Kent and the LEADER Programme once gain featured prominently, with several local businesses highlighting their respective success.

The Conference also saw the launch of the 2009/10 BRAG Annual Review and Monitoring Report – this provides a detailed overview of Rural Strategy delivery progress and relevant activity over the course of the year. Overall, a successful event!



## Rural Research

**BRAG's commitment to delivering original research saw the production of two reports in 2011 – the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Rural Business Survey and the Community Impact Bucks Rural Deprivation Study. Both documents represent a desire to seek greater clarity on some of the most prominent issues and challenges facing the county's rural communities, with a view to improving our understanding and informing policy, decision-making processes and the allocation of resources.**

The first report presents the findings of a survey conducted in the second half of 2010 – a significant consultation exercise targeting 1,500 rural enterprises across the county. The survey sought to assess the relative health of rural enterprises across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, particularly in relation to the effects of the global recession, as well as outlining challenges and opportunities for growth and investment. The results were analysed and demonstrated the sheer variety and robustness of rural enterprises, as well as a genuine sense of optimism for the future with a focus on consolidation, growth and the significance of trading from a rural location. The results have helped to inform relevant policy and the county's strategic approach to business support, ensuring the contribution and value of rural enterprise to the local economy is fully recognised.

The Community Impact Bucks Rural Deprivation Study sought to assess the extent to which various measures of disadvantage are prevalent in rural communities; often 'masked' by traditional indices and other forms of analysis. The report outlines the level of deprivation in absolute numbers, highlighting areas of concern, from issues such as fuel poverty, to long-term limiting illness rates, low incomes and reduced access to personal transport. Similarly, this research will facilitate further analysis, helping to build up a more detailed picture of rural life. It is anticipated that a second wave of qualitative surveying will take place, allowing for a greater focus on local communities and their respective experiences of rural disadvantage.



## Strategic Influence

The past year has seen BRAG maintain its role as a lobbying body; seeking to influence policy and high-level decision-makers. Within this, the group has made representation on a number of issues and consultations via the submission of written evidence and correspondence. This includes:

- A full response to the High Speed Rail 2 (HS2) consultation, articulating our scepticism at the merits of the project and our collective concerns at the potential impacts on rural community vitality
- A response to Buckinghamshire County Council's Local Transport Plan (LTP3) consultation, outlining transport as a key concern for rural communities in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes
- Lobbying DEFRA to secure the retention of LEADER funding provision for the Chilterns AONB and Aylesbury Vale and Rural Milton Keynes Local Action Groups (LAGs)
- Lobbying Buckinghamshire County Council to re-assess its rural landholdings policy and its commitment to the retention of rural assets and farm-holdings
- An endorsement of the Rural Coalition report, seeking guidance and assurances that rural policy and the well-being of rural communities is embedded into local government priorities
- Support given to a number of campaigns, as championed by the Wycombe Rural Forum, such as the desire to see DEFRA take an affirmative stance on the threats posed by Bovine TB



Additionally, BRAG is actively participating in the emerging opportunities around the National Planning Policy Framework and the development of Local Nature Partnerships.

## LEADER Programme

BRAG continues to actively support the delivery of the LEADER Programme across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The Programme offers grants of up to £50k, supporting rural businesses, farmers and foresters to enhance their commercial activity via additional capital investment, enabling growth and diversification. Additionally, LEADER supports community-derived activities and also allocates grants to local projects with an emphasis on tourism, micro-business development and enhancing the capacity of local food supply chains. Both LAGs have been particularly successful in allocating grants over the course of the last year, being held in high regard and comparing favourably with other LEADER areas across the England. The following figures give an idea of this:



- Projects approved by both LAGs have helped to create 151 new rural jobs since LEADER's inception (mid 2011 figures)
- Projects approved by both LAGs have helped to safeguard 200 rural jobs since LEADER's inception (mid 2011 figures)

BRAG will continue to support the LEADER Programme as it continues to invest in rural enterprise throughout 2012.

## Broadband

**BRAG has also been working hard to support the delivery of high quality broadband connectivity to rural communities and businesses across the county. Given the benefits associated with superfast broadband, as well as the potential to refine the way in which local authority services are delivered, suitable high speed broadband infrastructure is integral to the county's continued vitality and prosperity. This is further reinforced by the feedback within the Rural Business Survey and other supporting evidence.**

Buckinghamshire is now at the forefront of embracing the opportunity to deliver next generation broadband infrastructure to the county, through a working relationship with Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) and local authorities in Buckinghamshire and

Hertfordshire. A Local Broadband Plan has been developed, which provides the basis for the county's aspirations, seeking to support the widespread roll-out of superfast broadband to approximately 90% of premises, ensuring remaining areas can achieve speeds of at least 2Mbps. Whilst BT's continued investment has helped to increase the superfast footprint (particularly in urban and market town locations), there are still a large number of premises which receive sub-standard broadband, predominantly in rural areas. This is where the project will have most impact – in those locations where the market alone will not deliver.

A series of wireless pilot projects have also been developed in rural parts of Aylesbury Vale. One of these is centred on Wingrave Business Park – a new wireless service is now available to a number of surrounding communities, with business and residents benefiting from much-improved broadband speeds. BRAG will continue to support the roll-out of the BDUK project in 2012, acting as a mouthpiece for rural community broadband needs, assisting in demand stimulation and registration activities and ensuring rural areas maximise the potential for Government subsidy and accelerated commercial investment.

## Rural Strategy refresh – Issues paper

BRAG has undertaken the development of a rural Issues Paper; the first step in the refresh of a new Rural Strategy for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The existing family of reports was launched in 2008 and has proven to be an integral tool in advocating the rural agenda, shaping policy and articulating the value of rural communities. With the life of the current document coming to an end, combined with the emergence of new issues and changes in Government policy, this paper seeks to outline the basis for a new Rural Strategy. The document offers a summary of key issues, concerns and opportunities for action which have been identified thus far; based both on qualitative and quantitative intelligence. This provides the foundation from which to build a clearer picture of rural life in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. The paper will be launched at the 2011 BRAG Conference, with a wider consultation taking place throughout 2012.



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Broadband  
for Bucks**

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## Moving forward...

Looking ahead to 2012 and beyond, BRAG faces a number of challenges, not least the constantly evolving political environment and the transformation of the public sector. From a rural perspective, a number of issues remain on the horizon; BRAG will be looking to focus on these as a matter of priority.

These include:

1. Rural Strategy refresh consultation – BRAG will be seeking widespread views and feedback on issues/opportunities and the shape of a new Rural Strategy; likely to be in the form of a countywide survey
2. Broadband – BRAG will provide support to the proposed BDUK broadband project, which focuses on rural locations, via community outreach, stakeholder liaison and research
3. National Planning Policy Framework – BRAG will keep abreast of this emerging policy and the implications for rural communities (Neighbourhood Planning, 'Right to Buy' etc)
4. LEADER Programme – BRAG will continue to support the allocation of rural grants available through LEADER, with a view to considering its future direction beyond 2012
5. HS2 – BRAG will be assessing the role it can play in the mitigation of high speed rail, should the Government come to a definitive decision as whether or not it will be built

## More information

If you would like more information on BRAG and its activity, or may be interested in becoming more involved, do let us know. Contact:

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