



Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Rural Strategy refresh Consultative Issues Paper

I. Context

This Issues Paper is the first step 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, this paper seeks to outline the basis for a new Rural Strategy.

The document provides a summary of key issues, concerns and opportunities for action which have been identified thus far; based both on qualitative and quantitative intelligence. Thanks to all those who have already contributed their feedback – this provides the foundation from which to build a clearer picture of rural life in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

I.1 National picture

On a national scale, the rural agenda remains highly relevant, despite the Coalition Government's changes in focus and the loss of organisations, such as the Commission for Rural Communities and regional rural fora. Bodies such as Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) and associated Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) partners continue to provide a wealth of rural-specific data and intelligence, integral to shaping policy and increasing the awareness of rural issues and opportunities. The 2011 Rural Insight Survey is one of the most recent and prominent pieces of research, which outlines its top 5 priorities/challenges based on respondent feedback:

- 1. The medium term increasing costs of fuel and travel**
- 2. The provision of local affordable housing**
- 3. An increasingly ageing population**
- 4. The provision of meaningful employment for local people**
- 5. Broadband connectivity**

Broadly speaking this matches the findings of this initial scoping paper and provides a useful baseline to gauge how Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes compares to the national picture, as well as identifying issues, challenges and opportunities that are unique to the county.

I.2 Structure

The previous Rural Strategy adopted a structure with a particular focus on 5 priority themes. It is proposed that the refreshed document utilises a similar arrangement, under the headings below:

- Enterprise and Skills
- Housing
- Health and Well-being
- Sustainable Communities
- Services and Transport

It is recognised that whilst certain issues and opportunities have been assigned to a specific priority theme, these may also be cross-cutting and relevant to a number of themes.

2. Priority Themes

2.1 Enterprise and Skills

1. **The challenge of employment** – in particular the provision of meaningful local employment, which is well-placed to contribute towards the county's economic growth and capitalise on relevant educations and skills, thereby providing the basis for prosperous and sustainable rural communities. The 2011 Rural Insight Survey highlights the level of concern at rising unemployment, with 60% of respondents citing it as a significant concern, whilst ACRE data suggests significant increases in rural unemployment, with young people particularly badly affected.
2. **Business development** – providing the conditions from which businesses can grow, linked to the appropriate provision of infrastructure, allocated land space, business and skills support as well as the continued promotion of diversification, and entrepreneurial SME start-ups. The 2011 Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Rural Business Survey outlines the relative buoyancy of the rural economy, but also the need for continued investment in business support and an enterprising environment.
3. **Public services** – the public sector is changing at a significant pace with down-sizing and changes in service delivery placing rural areas at risk from increased unemployment, a reduced service footprint and fewer contracting opportunities. All of the local authorities are tasked with making substantial savings which is changing the way it operates and delivers services.
4. **Broadband** – whilst additional commercial investment has seen the level of superfast coverage increase, broadband connectivity remains a key issue in rural (particularly in the north of the county), where slow speeds and 'not spots' still remain; a key economic and social driver, embracing 21st Century ways of working and reducing the need for car travel. The Buckinghamshire Local Broadband Plan identifies approximately 46,000 premises which are without next generation access, or in some cases, 'standard' broadband connectivity.
5. **Forestry and agriculture** – supporting the development of the agricultural sector, enabling the growth of land-based industries and encouraging the new generation of farmers and landowners. Additionally, the economic potential of the county's woodlands should be maximised, creating new markets for forestry products and associated supply-chains. The LEADER grants programme, covering the Chilterns AONB and rural Aylesbury Vale and Milton Keynes, has supported many such businesses, demonstrating the value of these enterprises.
6. **Destination Buckinghamshire** – tourism remains a key component of the rural economy and opportunities for growth, place branding and increases in the provision of overnight accommodation should be pursued. Additionally, the prominence of the natural environment, country estates and local food producers should be recognised as a key visitor attraction. Figures for 2009 suggest that 1,313,000 trips by staying visitors were made to the county, supporting approximately 8.5% of local employment.
7. **Education and skills** – whilst rural communities generally demonstrate high levels of skill, there is a need to ensure that a good education is afforded to all age groups and backgrounds. The retention of land-based skills is particularly relevant, as is the need to ensure that the county's most promising entrepreneurial talent invests in rural areas. Recent NFU intelligence suggests that there is a growing influx of young generational farmers who are pursuing a career in agriculture.

2.2 Housing

1. **The housing challenge** – in particular the provision of local affordable housing and the opportunity to meet the needs of young and ageing populations who wish to remain in their communities. The retention of local people in rural areas will contribute greatly to continued community vitality and sustainability. The problem of housing affordability is recognised by the Rural Insight Survey; latest Land registry figures suggest that the county's house prices are 54% higher than the UK average.
2. **Rented housing provision** – the availability of rented property remains a significant challenge in the county's rural communities. Housing provision in rural areas (particularly social) needs to be flexible enough to meet the needs of local people, yet there are significant concerns that changes to the social housing framework and reductions in social housing funding will exacerbate the shortage of social affordable housing in rural communities.
3. **Planning policy reform** – the National Planning Policy Framework and implementation of the 'Localism' Bill offers both opportunities and threats for the provision of affordable rural housing. It remains unclear as to whether the adoption of Neighbourhood Planning at a local level will facilitate or hinder the allocation of rural exception sites/schemes. The Rural Insight Survey suggests that impending planning system changes have been met with a decidedly missed response.

2.3 Health and Well-being

1. **Access to the countryside** – an integral asset of rural communities, the quality of the natural environment should be fully embraced and utilised by all. Access to the countryside promotes associated health benefits, as well as an understanding of local heritage, flora and fauna and biodiversity. DEFRA recognises the importance of interaction with the natural environment and the positive effects this can have on physical and mental health.
2. **Provision of recreational facilities** – there remains an opportunity to ensure that rural communities benefit from varied and high quality recreational facilities, catering for all generations and age groups. The Localism-driven 'right to buy' and 'right to build' policies offer rural communities the chance to prioritise the allocation of such services.
3. **Access to health and social care services** – the provision of health-related services remains a key concern in the county's rural communities. Reliable and functional access to GP surgeries and other professional care is a challenge to many, particularly the elderly, and further changes are likely as the NHS meets the challenges of budget reductions, alongside the ongoing shift in health functions between hospitals. Advancements in technology now provide the platform for online solutions. The county is seeking to become a 'hub' for remote health technology; the implementation of an ICE-T demonstration in Aylesbury is recognition of the importance of this.
4. **Crime reduction** – the perception and actual presence of crime continues to be an issue of paramount concern in many rural communities. Anti-social behaviour remains a threat to community cohesion, whilst the increased prevalence of farm-related theft is now attracting the direct attention of the Thames Valley police. Recent NFU figures suggest that crime in rural areas more than doubled over the first six months of 2011.

5. **The challenge of disadvantage** – recognising the impact of ‘rurality’ on the experience of disadvantage is a key challenge; one which is difficult to demonstrate and articulate. Whilst the general perception of rural communities is one of affluence, research and intelligence by Community Impact Bucks suggests that elements of deprivation and disadvantage are concealed by traditional measurement (fuel poverty etc).

2.4 Sustainable Communities

1. **Land management** – this remains a priority for rural communities, underpinning the very nature and appearance of the landscape. Encouraging a mixed and active use of the natural environment linked to food production, forestry and conservation is essential if local prosperity and environmental integrity are to be maintained. Both the NFU and DEFRA continue to recognise the value of effective land management, and the associated financial difficulties.
2. **Sustainable development**– the Government’s National Planning Policy Framework ambitions sets out its position in favour of sustainable development, providing communities with the opportunity to shape their vision for local growth. The implications of this are unclear and concerns remain as to the ambiguity of the interpretation of ‘sustainability’. The Rural Insight Survey demonstrates considerable suspicion around the Government’s commitment to ‘sustainable development’.
3. **Environmental sustainability** – there is a genuine opportunity to embed the principles of sustainability within rural communities, encapsulating a cohesive response to climate change, water resource management, energy consumption and production, as well as maximising woodland resources and integrating an approach to green infrastructure. Locally, the LEADER grants programme has sought to support a number of local projects with a focus on sustainability.
4. **HS2** – whilst the decision to build HS2 has yet to be made, the project will have a significant impact on the well-being of rural communities and the surrounding natural environment. If approved, rural community campaigning and involvement will be integral in helping to mitigate the most prominent effects, both during construction and those with longer-term impacts. The likely impact of HS2 has been articulated by the Chilterns AONB, which suggests that the project’s green and economic credentials are critically flawed.
5. **Conservation and biodiversity** – the ‘sense of place’ in rural communities is a major component of local identity. Opportunities to promote the greater appreciation of valuable landscapes, cultural heritage and the importance of natural resources should be pursued, as well as being embedded within the local community vision. Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust recognises the threat of habitat fragmentation and development in relation to biodiversity in Berks, Bucks and Oxon.

2.5 Services and Transport

1. **The retention of services**– access to services, such as those related to health, education, community, retail and leisure remains a key concern in rural areas. The continued decline and loss of rural assets, such as pubs and post offices, further threatens the vitality of communities, as people venture farther afield for life’s necessities. The 2011 Rural Insight Survey demonstrates the concern regarding service access; 97% of respondents identified this as a key rural differentiator.
2. **The challenge of transport** – in particular the impact of increasing fuel and travel costs and the withdrawal/non-existence of integrated public transport in rural areas remain issues

of paramount concern in the county's rural communities. Support for local community transport initiatives and the development of new approaches such as car clubs and community bus services remains important. Additionally, many rural areas in the south of the county suffer from issues associated with traffic congestion due to a reliance on car travel.

3. **High speed broadband** – connectivity and service quality remains patchy across the county's rural areas, with some communities receiving no broadband at all. Investment in superfast technology and its associated benefits provides a genuine opportunity for businesses to operate more effectively and efficiently, often from home, reducing the reliance on car travel. Local data suggests that approximately 20% of the county's premises achieve speeds of only 2mbps or less.
4. **Infrastructure** – with new organisations and bodies, such as Local Enterprise Partnerships, tasked with delivering future infrastructure requirements, it is vital that communities maximise the opportunities for investment in rural areas. Improved roads, railways, sustainable energy supplies, water/sewerage networks and an integration into governing policy will contribute towards greater prosperity and vitality. The current East-West Rail proposals suggest a drastic improvement in regional access and journey times, as well as the creation of up to 12,000 new jobs.
5. **HS2** – whilst a threat to rural community sustainability and well-being, HS2 also poses additional challenges in relation to transport. The construction and operational phases are likely to cause significant amounts of disruption whilst it is also suggested that the high speed route will displace regional train services, reducing the accessibility of communities and local service and employment centres. Recent Chilterns AONB research suggested that HS2 Ltd had grossly underestimated their valuation of site spoil and the associated disposal logistics.

3. Next steps

The 2011 BRAG Conference will act as the launch for a substantial period of consultation as we look to compile a definitive view of the most pertinent issues and opportunities affecting the county's rural communities. Once complete, this will inform the development of a new Rural Strategy for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes; an overarching vision for rural community prosperity, development and sustainability.

This Issues Paper represents an initial view on rural life and the challenges presented within our communities, based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence. It is, however, not a complete picture and your feedback will be vital as we seek to form an accurate picture of rural Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

As such, your feedback and comments would be greatly appreciated. Please use the attached survey to outline your thoughts on the Issues Paper, particularly in relation to anything that has been missed or where points require additional interpretation/embellishment. If you are aware of any supporting information, such as reports, surveys or other forms of research, then do highlight them in your feedback. Alternatively, please send us your feedback using the contact details below.

Thank you for taking the time to consider your views in relation to the refresh of the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Rural Strategy. If you have any further questions relating to its content or how to formally outline your consultation feedback, please contact:

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Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Rural Strategy refresh : Issues Paper feedback

Let us know your comments in relation to the content of the Issues Paper below:

Priority theme 1: Enterprise and Skills

Please provide your feedback based on the key issues and opportunities presented within this theme. Have we missed anything? Do the items presented need additional context or embellishment? Additionally, please highlight any supporting information, such as reports, surveys or other forms of research.

Priority theme 2: Housing

Please provide your feedback based on the key issues and opportunities presented within this theme. Have we missed anything? Do the items presented need additional context or embellishment? Additionally, please highlight any supporting information, such as reports, surveys or other forms of research.

Priority theme 3: Health and Well-being

Please provide your feedback based on the key issues and opportunities presented within this theme. Have we missed anything? Do the items presented need additional context or embellishment? Additionally, please highlight any supporting information, such as reports, surveys or other forms of research.

Priority theme 4: Sustainable Communities

Please provide your feedback based on the key issues and opportunities presented within this theme. Have we missed anything? Do the items presented need additional context or embellishment? Additionally, please highlight any supporting information, such as reports, surveys or other forms of research.

Priority theme 5: Service and Transport

Please provide your feedback based on the key issues and opportunities presented within this theme. Have we missed anything? Do the items presented need additional context or embellishment? Additionally, please highlight any supporting information, such as reports, surveys or other forms of research.

Other

Please provide any additional comments below.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this feedback form. Your comments will help to shape a refreshed Rural Strategy for Buckinghamshire and Milton-Keynes