

DELIVERING FOR OUR COUNTRYSIDE

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT ACTION
FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES



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THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS ARE THE PARTY OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

Councillor Heather Kidd



For as long as I can remember the mantra has been that the Conservative Party are the party of the countryside. My question is why? Have they done anything for rural areas or have they simply taken them for granted? It is time that we who live and work here in our communities and understand far more about rural issues than our opposition, took on that role. This year, on 2 May 2019, the public in many areas gave us their confidence and elected around 704 new councillors, many of them in rural and coastal areas. We are now in control in 49 councils either alone or in partnership. A clear majority of these are rural or coastal or both.

Now is the time to share best practice and strengthen our policy for rural delivery. This booklet should help to inform that and inspire many of our new councils to deliver even more. We are the party of community.

Rural and coastal communities are individual and have characters of their own. How do the Liberal Democrats work with that and make it work?

Campaigning needs to be the same but different to that in urban areas. Liberal Democrats are far better at working on the ground than other parties but in rural areas it's remembered and valued by constituents.

Knocking on doors across a rural area will pay dividends if you do it year in and year out. Meeting people in the back of beyond where the opposition rarely go, stays with those residents and many repay the work. Knocking on the doors of new residents on the electoral roll is also a winning step.

Regular newsletters touching the whole of the electoral area keep residents abreast of local issues and your work is of course important in both rural and urban areas, but in many rural areas, residents frequently cannot get that local information easily and you are providing a real service in doing that.

Email contact in rural areas is even more effective as the emails can cover huge distances and they are free. Complying with GDPR is important but not difficult.

So what better than to be able to quote good practice from Liberal Democrat run councils to show up your administration if you are in opposition? Or use if you are the administration and want to avoid reinventing the wheel on housing, road repairs, adult social care delivery in remote area, transport, education etc.

This booklet starts that process and hopefully will begin the process of our councils sharing their successes more often for others to use and learn from.

Is now the time for us to launch a strategy for the countryside, our market and coastal towns? A clear set of messages to our rural areas of what we stand for in the countryside, from biodiversity and the environment, to access to services and isolation, equality, investment, regeneration and fair funding.

Councillor Heather Kidd is a Shropshire Councillor, Chair of the LGA Liberal Democrat Group, and the lead Liberal Democrat Councillor on the LGA People and Places Board.

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN OUR MARKET TOWNS IN A TIME OF AUSTERITY

Councillor John Hubbard



The challenges of how to deal with young people have always been a test for those in power, be it at parish, district, county or even national level. Tragically, in these times of austerity the answer is the closure of support services, making redundant the professionals with the skills to address the needs of young people and the disposal of long-held community assets such as youth centres.

I'm going to explore how we have addressed these challenges, and the growing new ones of ever-increasing Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and county lines in the Wiltshire market town of Melksham.

I was first elected to the town council in a by-election in 2008 and was, as the 'young person' on the town council (I was only 38 after all!), asked to be the council's representative on the Extended Services Steering Group. This group, part of the Every Child Matters agenda, had a healthy budget to spend on support services for schools. We employed parent support advisors, funded breakfast clubs and funded

some counselling support for young people.

I soon ended up chairing the steering group and in 2011 when the Extended Services project was scrapped by the government I worked with the headteachers in the town to look at how we could continue some of the work we had been doing.

In November 2011 we started a new charity called Extended Services (Melksham Area). The aim of the charity was to continue the fledgling counselling project that we had started, in the hope that as a charity we could attract funding from other sources. At this time, we were working closely with the unitary council's youth service and the counselling was based in the youth centre.

Keen to promote the many positives that young people bring to society we also started a new Melksham Young People's Awards which celebrated the individual achievements of young people.

For two and a half years all went well. We managed to bring in some funding to support the work we were doing, the counselling service had a permanent waiting list demonstrating the need, and the annual awards ceremonies were a continual success.

Then in 2014, Wiltshire Council made drastic cuts to youth services. Every youth centre in the county was closed and the youth workers made redundant. Our counselling service, which was based in the youth centre until this time, was turfed out and alternative accommodation was offered at the library in the town centre.

The impact was immediate and significant.

The young people voted with their feet on the change of location for the counselling support and the referrals dried up. Young people did not want to go to the library to attend a support service. They wanted to go to a young person friendly environment that was staffed by people they knew and trusted.

Identifying the need for some form of positive activities for young people, the charity decided to try and provide an alternative. After much searching, we found an alternative location to hold a weekly youth club. Feedback from young people was that the venue was not suitable, and they missed the workers they used to see, but we did get about 10 regular attenders each week.

Using my role as a Wiltshire councillor I investigated what was happening with the old youth centre which was now empty and boarded up. My research revealed that the council was spending £11,000 per year keeping the building empty!

After a strong press campaign and several questions in council I finally got the council to discuss renting the building to the charity to run our youth activities from. Eventually a deal was done and in November 2015 we opened at The Canberra Centre for the first youth club session. Our weekly attendance grew from 10 to 35 overnight.

We also took this opportunity to rebrand that charity, recognising that our focus had shifted from the old Extended Services work to, instead, replacing the former youth service. The new name for the charity was Young Melksham.

In January 2016 we opened a second night, now running clubs every Tuesday and Thursday and later that year we started a new club on Wednesday nights as well. In the summer of 2016 Wiltshire Council further cut its support for young people with the removal of the locality youth co-ordinators. We had been working very closely with the officer covering Melksham.

This was when we took the first of many significant leaps of faith and decided to employ a permanent youth worker for the charity on a 0.5FTE contract. The main driver for this decision was that, although the charity was headed by an enthusiastic experienced volunteer youth worker, we felt strongly that having a professional youth worker was essential.

We then, in February 2017, opened on a fourth night, offering a dedicated SEND youth club, addressing the serious shortage of provision for this cohort following further reductions in service by the council.

Today, we are negotiating a 125 year lease on the youth centre, have lined up a series of capital improvements on the building sponsored by local business, employ one full time youth work manager, one 0.5FTE assistant youth worker and a host of casual youth workers to deliver our four evenings a week of youth work. We run holiday activities in every school holiday, except Christmas, and an after school youth café two days a week. Currently our youth work team will work with between 150 and 200 young people every week.

Oh, and once we returned to the youth centre the counselling service picked back up and we are once more offering free-to-access counselling support for young people every week. If our recent funding campaign is successful, we will be expanding that to double the number of sessions available and introduce a new Early Help service to complement it.

Our biggest challenge, without doubt, has been funding. With no guaranteed sources of income, we have had to fundraise and rely on grants to bring in the money to deliver our services. Be prepared to spend tens of hours a month completing grant application forms – and be equally prepared to see most of them fail. It's the least glamorous and most soul-destroying part of the project, but your fundraiser is probably your most valuable team member.

Throughout its time, Young Melksham has tried to identify the needs of the community through working directly with young people and their families and wherever possible meeting those needs head-on.

We have never forgotten that we are a community-based organisation led by the town for the town. Young Melksham and its success to date is not just about the work I have done – it is about the work of a whole team of people. It has always been my judgement that there is more to gain from the service being seen as a community project – that everyone knows was started by, and is run by, a Liberal Democrat councillor – than there is in being seen to try and take all credit for the work of a wider team.

My advice for replicating our work in your town:

Build a team of people from across the community. Be brave and be ambitious. Be prepared to take risks and stare failure and, potentially, humiliation in the face. When you need to be political, as I was for instance in identifying the cost of keeping the youth centre closed, contain it to the specific issue and use it to create an opportunity rather than just to score points.

Jon Hubbard was elected to Melksham Town Council in 2008 and then to Wiltshire Council in 2009. He formally led the opposition Liberal Democrat Group on Wiltshire Council, increasing its size from 20 to 27 in the very difficult 2013 elections. Until 2019 Jon was the Liberal Democrat Lead Member and Vice Chairman of the County Councils Network and served on the LGA Children's Board Bright Futures Task Group. He has chaired the Children's Select (Scrutiny) Committee on Wiltshire Council since 2013 and is currently Town Mayor of Melksham.

WORKING WITH OUR FARMING COMMUNITIES

Phil Bennion MEP



In our 2018 Rural Communities Policy Paper we Liberal Democrats restated our commitment to a farming industry which has food production as its primary focus. Although we agree that more needs to be done in rewarding farmers for delivering ‘public goods’, such as biodiversity and landscape, support for farming cannot be a success if it is restricted to such projects.

With a no deal Brexit now a real possibility with Boris Johnson setting unrealistic red lines for a deal with the EU, our immediate concern for farmers is to keep open the European export markets for our sheep meat, beef and cereals. Almost 40 per cent of the lamb we produce is exported to the EU and the tariffs under no deal would render this trade non-viable.

With our lambs coming to market in the autumn it is inevitable under a no deal Brexit that prices will crash catastrophically. This is just one of many reasons that we believe that our farming industry is best served by remaining in the EU and we will continue this fight until the last.

Many farmers voted leave because of excessive regulation of agriculture and believed that we would be better off if we could scrap the red tape. Unfortunately our dependence on EU markets means that very little red tape would be abolished even if we do leave. It is also true that the UK government has supported much of the red tape in any case. Our best approach to this problem is to elect representatives who will take a scientific approach to regulation and fight this at an EU level.

If the UK does leave the EU, then the draft Agriculture Bill instigated by Michael Gove will probably come into force. Liberal Democrats have opposed much of this Bill, particularly the complete phasing out of Basic Payments. We do agree that more could be spent on enhancing habitats on our farms and combatting climate change in the industry, but Mr Gove’s proposals are contrary to WTO rules. In our own policy paper we took the trouble to understand these rules, which limit spending on environmental schemes to their actual costs. Hence without Basic Payments farm incomes cannot be propped up with environmental payments. To make ends meet farmers would have to farm far more acres per person, reducing their capacity to deliver even the current level of environmental goods.

There has been much discussion of the CAP and its tendency to reward the biggest farms with the largest payments.

This is now politically impossible to defend. However it is necessary to avoid unintended consequences in any redesign of a Basic Scheme. We would use a taper to claw back much of this money from the largest farms. This will free up money to spend on habitat and measures to address climate change and favour small to medium sized farms which can sustain an adequate farming population to deliver the public goods that the taxpayer desires. This would also add to the current level of rural development funding that also supports training, diversification and measures to make our farms more competitive.

We would also support an expansion of farm woodland as an additional economic activity for farmers. Woodland is an effective carbon sink which helps in the fight against climate change. Areas of woodland spread across thousands of farms is a far more sustainable approach than the re-wilding advocated by some radical groups, which would leave these areas devoid of a functioning rural economy. Similarly we will reward farming techniques which increase soil organic matter for similar reasons. Alongside this we would invest in measures to improve farm productivity, as there is no point in reducing our own emissions from farming if we produce less and the additional food is imported from areas where rain forest is being destroyed for the purpose.

Finally we would give real teeth to the Groceries Code Adjudicator to deliver farmers a greater share of the retail price of their output.

We recognise that farmers are victims of market failures where they are weak sellers to a small number of large buyers.

This well rounded policy for farmers and our rural communities reflects the needs of farmers as well as the priorities of tax payers. Rather than risk the whole industry with an ideological approach that could ruin the industry, we will go forward with well thought out programmes that farmers are happy to deliver. If we can also stop Brexit, we can assure farmers of continued tariff-free export markets on our doorstep for the future.

Farmers are very connected people, very often farmers' extended families are enormous and quite local, while farms are involved with a wide range of local businesses. So a well written addressed target letter or survey to a farm from local Liberal Democrat councillors and campaigners is one of the most powerful pieces of literature we can produce. There are a range of templates available on the ALDC website or Liberal Democrat campaign googledrive to help. Make sure some of the questions you ask are local – ask a farmer first what are they most concerned by locally.

Phil Bennion is MEP for the West Midlands Region and a working farmer growing biomass crops at his farm near Tamworth. He is a former Staffordshire County and Lichfield District Councillor who has been closely involved in shaping Liberal Democrat policy as it affects rural areas since the 1990s.

DELIVERING THE WELSH GOVERNMENT'S FIRST EVER RURAL EDUCATION ACTION

Kirsty Williams AM



The Welsh Liberal Democrats have a strong tradition in Wales' rural heartlands. Over the last 100 years constituencies like Ceredigion, Montgomeryshire and later Brecon and Radnorshire have been accustomed to Welsh Liberal and Welsh Liberal Democrat representatives.

With this tradition comes a keen understanding of the importance of rural education. An understanding of the importance it has for children, for parents and carers, and more widely for the communities that rural schools are at the heart of.

The link between our party and rural education is personified by Mark Williams, who served as Ceredigion's Member of Parliament between 2005 and 2017. Mark was a teacher before he was an MP, and he is teaching again now – at a school in my constituency as it happens.

For my part – representing Brecon and Radnorshire for over 20 years – the value of rural education has always been obvious to me. Supporting and

improving rural education has been right at the top of my priorities.

I was therefore pleased that our last Welsh Assembly manifesto contained a number of proposals with rural communities in mind, including specific plans to protect rural schools. And following this manifesto, I have been even more pleased to deliver and implement the first rural education action plan in the Welsh Government's history.

Rural education action plan

As Education Minister I have announced a national mission of reform in Wales – raising standards, reducing the socio-economic attainment gap, and delivering an education system that is a source of national pride and public confidence.

This national mission must apply to all of our schools, to all of our pupils. And this has necessitated specific action to help rural schools tackle the particular challenges they face.

The rural schools action plan contains three main themes: strengthening organisation and support for rural schools; supporting equity and excellence in rural schools; and supporting rural schools as community and educational spaces.

Wales now has a presumption against the closure of rural schools. The School Organisation Code has been changed,

requiring local authorities to consider all viable alternatives to closure – for example federation or increasing community use of buildings. In order to do this, we had to bring forward the first ever definition and list of rural schools in Wales.

A £2.5 million per year ‘Small and Rural Schools Grant’ has been set up, tailored to deliver benefits for these schools. This could be through improving digital technology, supporting collaboration between schools, or providing administrative support in schools where headteachers have significant teaching commitments.

With broadband connectivity continuing to be a source of frustration in many parts of rural Wales, we’ve been able to secure a £5 million fund to connect schools with superfast broadband. In today’s classrooms, pupils need access to high-quality broadband to be able to access everything our education system can offer. Well over 300 Welsh schools have benefitted, or are set to benefit, from the fund.

Furthermore, the Welsh Government is providing capital investment to help schools meet the needs of local communities, including through a £15 million grant to build community learning centres. Things like adapting buildings, increasing the size of schools halls or enhancing sporting facilities can all cement a school’s role at the heart of its community. It provides joined-up

thinking with the changes to the School Organisation Code, wherein increasing the community use of buildings is something local authorities must consider as an alternative to school closure.

These are some of the headlines, and there is more detail for which I have no space to go into here. Together, the action plan brings together what I believe is the most concentrated measures of support for rural education in the history of the Welsh Government. It recognises how important our rural schools are, not only as part of building a high-quality education system, but as institutions that are part of the very fabric of rural life.

Championing our credentials

I’m proud to have been able to deliver this in government, a plan which is steeped in Welsh Liberal Democrat values. The reforms shine a light on our enduring and unfailing commitment to rural education.

For this reason, and much more, the Welsh Liberal Democrats have a strong claim to be the champions of rural Wales. It is a claim that is applicable in other parts of Great Britain, and I believe we must get better at owning it.

The rural Liberal Democrat-Conservative battlegrounds will be familiar for many of you; the rural Liberal Democrat-

Plaid Cymru/SNP battlegrounds will be familiar for some of you. Regardless of where we are, Liberal Democrats must be prepared to show that we are best placed to deliver for rural communities.

Here in Wales, through our education reforms, we have been able to demonstrate that very clearly.

Kirsty Williams AM is Welsh Liberal Democrat Education Minister in the Welsh Government

GETTING THINGS DONE IN OPPOSITION

Councillor Sarah Osborne



Don't wait until you are running the council – you can use budget amendments to achieve concrete changes from opposition!

At the budget meeting of Lewes District Council in February 2019, as Leader of the Opposition, I secured unanimous support for a series of budget amendments including proposals for pop-up and flexible business space to be developed. All councillors supported my proposal to fully fund the development of the business case (including the long-term viability assessment of growing pop-up office space in Lewes District), and the ring fencing of monies for refurbishment and fit outs of two buildings identified as being suitable.

I set out a cost effective way of bringing back underutilised council owned assets into productive use. Furthermore, the proposed use would directly contribute to economic growth by supporting micro businesses to expand and provide an environment where micro businesses could network and support each other thereby improving their resilience and increasing their longevity.

Other local authorities in this country and elsewhere in Europe have found that providing affordable flexible-term office spaces for individuals and businesses has helped to combat feelings of isolation and offers users invaluable support through shared aspirations and the exchange of ideas and expertise. Add to that a rental stream for the council and you really could have a win-win situation!

I proposed investment in two phases:

- Firstly, monies to fully develop the business case including the long-term viability assessment of growing pop-up office space in two areas of Lewes District.
- Secondly, should the business case confirm a good rental income based on a five-year plan, the council would refurbish and fit out as is necessary two buildings, one in Lewes and one in Newhaven.

Areas chosen

Newhaven is a coastal town with a population of around 13,000 with a range of characteristics that are in part urban, rural and coastal. It has been the victim of the economic downturn and a long-term lack of public spending. The town centre in particular has suffered and there are many empty shops. Although regeneration of the town is a priority at local, regional and national level and it will be going

through significant regeneration over the next five-10 years (particularly around the vicinity of the town centre), the ambitious proposals will need time to assemble. Therefore using the empty buildings the council already owns to bring in much needed activity into the town would provide a catalyst for local businesses and tangible evidence now that this council is investing in its future.

Lewes is a market town, population around 17,000. The building chosen is owned by the council, is right in the town centre and has been empty for a number of years. Lewes is the hub for the majority of residents living in the rural areas, being the closest town to the majority of villages in the district. As some of the villages still suffer poor broadband and mobile connectivity and no suitable buildings were available it is hoped that a flexible office space in Lewes would support the growth of businesses for those residents living in rural areas who might otherwise have to endure unsuitable accommodation or a long commute to other urban areas. Research showed that there is good level of demand for flexible office space and occupancy rates are very high in the surrounding area.

Background

Just over 83 per cent of businesses in East Sussex are micro businesses, slightly higher than the national average. Although survival rates are also above average with over 90 per

cent surviving their first year, less than 50 per cent survive five years or more. A critical factor to the ability for such businesses to expand is the provision of suitable space to enable them to move out of unsuitable accommodation, whether that is at home, in a garage or of poor quality. It is at this point that a micro business can be at most risk of failing due to a combination of inflexible accommodation and high overheads.

The district council has successfully developed space for small businesses in the past and these proposals will complement the existing offers by providing not only small offices but also significant areas of co-working space.

Both proposals would also bring buildings back into use and provide increased customers for local shops and services, especially during the quieter weekdays. And provide a catalyst for local businesses and tangible evidence that this council is investing in its future.

Supporting amendment

At the same budget I also secured funding for the creation of a new trade and investment account manager who will focus on attracting new investment to Lewes district and supporting businesses to grow, trade locally, nationally and internationally.

Never before have local authorities needed to do more to attract new

businesses to their areas. They will soon be partially reliant on business rates for much of their income so will need to resource a focused approach to boost the start-up and growth of businesses.

The Lewes district's economy is very varied with different areas possessing different characteristics, challenges and opportunities. For example, the economy of our rural areas is very different to the manufacturing and industrial hub of Newhaven.

Much of the district's business base is small in scale or start-ups. With more than 86 per cent of businesses having less than 10 employees, it makes sense to provide dedicated support and build on this existing activity to promote the economy and growth and the council has knowledge and influence. The account managers could provide a full spectrum of tailored support including facilitating site visits, providing local knowledge of the area and its skills base, discussing infrastructure requirements, including support with negotiation of infrastructure funding, navigation of the planning system and funding access.

I believe this post will in turn generate new jobs and will have a multiplier effect in the local economy.

This is a pilot and I believe on its completion it will show a good return and justify its continuation, although that will be for future administrations to decide on.

Councillor Sarah Osborne was formerly Opposition Leader on Lewes District Council and is an East Sussex County Councillor. She is also a Liberal Democrat member of the LGA People and Places Board.

INVOLVING RURAL AREAS THROUGH VILLAGE DESIGN GUIDES

Councillor Dr Tumi Hawkins



Living in a rural area has lots of advantages, offering a slower pace of life, a peaceful rural environment, with good air quality, often with larger house sizes and gardens for the price, and access to large green amenity spaces and the countryside for recreation.

As urban areas get more congested, rural areas are under pressure to take up the overflow growth from urban areas. This is especially so in Greater Cambridgeshire (South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City), identified by Government as a high growth area playing a key role in the economy of the country.

This growth pressure together with government directives to build to high densities means that rural communities often feel they are being 'urbanised' by design or by stealth or both. Even the term 'urban design' used commonly in planning departments contributes to this perception.

In recognition of the concerns expressed by residents of South Cambridgeshire about the increasing

changes to the rural character of villages, in 2018 the council secured funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to develop Village Design Guides (VDG). It enabled us to fund expert design consultants to work with village representatives to develop effective, forward-looking guidance, in a trailblazing pilot project of creating policy with communities.

A VDG describes the distinctive character of the village and sets out guidelines for how this should be enhanced by new developments. It helps communities and planners shape the character of new development in their area, responding to community priorities. It is a way to provide more locally specific detail, which supports and amplifies our Local Plan policies and once adopted carries material weight in deciding planning applications.

Not surprisingly, the project team received expressions of interest from 18 villages, but as funding was enough to develop eight VDGs, this resulted in a selection process. The scoring took into account three criteria – scale of anticipated growth, capacity of the parish to participate effectively, the need to fill a policy gap. Those communities that were not selected received full explanation and signposted to other areas of support for their particular requirements.

Councillors chose how they each participated in their local schemes, but were kept informed throughout.

Once the participating villages were selected, four consultants in master planning, urban design and architecture were appointed through an open procurement process, each consultant working on two VDGs. It was important though that they had experience designing and working on projects in rural communities.

VDGs sit below Neighbourhood Plans (NP). VDG is a short document, identifying unique features of a village that residents want to see in new developments. NPs on the other hand identify and specifies areas of growth that residents wish to see. A VDG could be looked at as a subset of a NP. In fact one of the villages has treated it exactly like that as they were well ahead in their preparation of a NP. So they ran both side by side and are now in public consultation for both.

As each village is unique in character and needs, the consultants used their specific expertise and experience to tailor the method used in creating the guides. The village groups were led by a project champion and included people with different skill sets and ages. They gathered evidence and data by meeting with other village groups including children, the older residents and other societies to help understand the needs and character of the village better.

The project groups then met with project officers and their consultants in a number of workshops pulling together the information gathered and developing the guidance principles. This part of the project took about three months, at the end of which the draft design guides were presented to and tested by the Design Enabling Panel.

Subsequently the design guides were approved by the Cabinet for public consultation and have now been refined based on those results and awaiting formal adoption as supplementary planning documents later this year. In the meantime, I am encouraging the use of the VDGs by planners in pre-application discussions with potential developers and have had some success.

Because the VDGs have been publicly consulted on and no objections, they now carry material planning weight. Any developer bringing forward plans in those communities must show they have taken the VDG into account. In my village, I made sure that a developer consulted with the VDG group and used the information in the guide in their design for a reserved matters application.

This process has been enlightening for the planning officers and empowering for villagers and their councillors. The outcome shows that rural communities far from being anti-growth, would like to see appropriate development providing a range of housing to meet the needs of all ages.

They would like to be involved at the early stages of a development proposal, to help shape it and avoid the antipathy that arises from the feeling of being ignored or done-to. It would also help to create a design that integrates the new developments with the existing. The perception of being urbanised came out strongly, as seen through the design of the new communities and they would like to see more rural design approaches.

Developers see advantages in building in rural areas, including lower land prices, easier builds in terms of construction and ability to create a place with a mix of uses amongst others. They must also ensure they understand and meet the needs of the local community that has to take the growth.

More work needs to be done by planners to bridge the gap that has been identified and likely applies to many rural communities. We must facilitate engagement between developers and village communities early in the development process and produce local plans and guidance to include more rural design principles.

Councillor Dr, Tumi Hawkins is the Lead Cabinet Member for Planning and is a Liberal Democrat Councillor on South Cambridgeshire District Council

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CAMBRIDGE NEWS THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2018 15

News

Greater planning say for villagers

ADAM CARE

Reporter
adam.care
@cambridge-news.co.uk

VILLAGERS in South Cambridgeshire are set to have more of a say in the development of their communities. Eight villages across the district are due to receive receive Government funds for new 'village Design Statements', that will allow residents a greater say in any future construction projects. These new statements will carry significant weight in the planning process, and aim to show how buildings, streets, spaces, landscape and materials come together to create areas with distinctive identity and character.

The scheme is being paid for after South Cambridgeshire District Council successfully bid for funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Design Quality Fund. It will see village groups given expert help and guidance to pull together their

design statements.

According to the council the process will ensure new development is "responsive to the character of the community that it is adding to, and enhances it".

It is also hoped they will 'help communities express what is important to them about the visual character of their village, provide clarity for developers on design issues, and enable council planners to push for high quality design.'

The statements will then become Supplementary Planning Documents that must be taken into account when development is planned for an area. Earlier this year, 18 villages expressed an interest in taking advantage of this process.

The communities were ranked by how much the project is likely to benefit them.

Eight were then selected to receive assistance to create their own village design statement. These are Caldecote, Fulbourn, Gamlingay, Histon and Impington, Over, Papworth Everard, Sawston and Sawney.

Community members will guide the process in each village, working with expert consultants. They will take part in workshops and activities to map the characteristics that make a village unique and draw up guidelines for new development.

Drawings and written guidelines will then be created that capture the results of the workshops, before planning consultants write-up the final document.

South Cambridgeshire District Council's lead cabinet member for planning, Cllr Tumi Hawkins, said: "This is a fantastic way for residents to have a big say on future development near where they live."

"Having this guidance prepared by communities will mean all sides have a clear understanding of what we expect to see built, right at the start of the planning process."

"I'm looking forward to seeing new designs emerge that truly enhance communities."

"This is a great example of planners and communities working together."



Cllr Tumi Hawkins says this is a great way for villagers to be involved

IMPROVING TRANSPORT IN OUR VILLAGES

Councillor Christine McHugh



People are often surprised at just how rural Bedford borough is. While two thirds of the borough's 171,623 population live in the towns of Bedford and Kempston, the towns are surrounded by 42 rural parishes that comprise over 60 villages. The villages include some with less than 100 houses, and several with over 1,000 houses. Some villages are bisected by major roads, such as the A6 through the 350 houses of Milton Ernest, while the 30 houses of Staploe are on a road so quiet that during Mayor Dave Hodgson's summer village tours, the Mayor can chat to residents about their concerns in the road!

During those village tours there are of course some issues that are common to almost all the villages, namely, the problem of speeding traffic, and connectedness – by broadband and by public transport.

In 2018 Bedford Borough Council was the only local authority except Greater London in which bus coverage increased, in stark contrast to the

overall national picture. In addition, our rural buses have shown a growth in user numbers. So how has this been achieved?

There has been no 'silver bullet'. The over-riding reason is that we have valued rural bus services highly and have fought to retain them. This work was supported by officers equally committed to rural bus services. While we have had to make savings, we have avoided making savage cuts to rural bus subsidies and left enough in the budget to run a decent network – as a network.

The unsexy but practical hard work was to redesign the tender for the rural bus contract very thoroughly, with a real focus on protecting important routes and design a more efficient network. The tender was redesigned only following thorough preparation and consultation with parish councils and users:

- each parish was visited at least twice, with the topic of buses timetabled and advertised in the local press
- feedback sheets were provided for passengers to fill in on all buses
- a series of public consultation events were held in rural locations.

From this we identified the key needs and service specifications. We then tendered in an innovative way using those priorities to form the basis of a tender based on needs.

Operators were asked to design the network and the assessment of their tenders was based on ability to meet the communities' service priorities and needs.

The new contract was first tendered in 2011 and has been retendered since with just a few changes. Following the award of the tender we've forged a strong partnership with the current operator, local company Grant Palmer.

There has been continuity of service and resisting reducing financial support has meant the network has been stable which in turn has increased passenger confidence. Overall passenger numbers on the network have grown and this has allowed us to further extend the network without increased funding.

We did have to step in to save several cross-border services after neighbouring authorities Central Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes pulled their subsidies.

Where possible we invested in the infrastructure:

- A bus stop programme bringing bus stops improving access to buses for those with mobility challenges.
- Brought buses through the Integrated Transport budget to bring forward the use of newer, lower emission buses.
- Real time information at bus stops and the bus station.

- A new bus station in Bedford – delivered during the Liberal Democrat Mayor's first full term after decades of calls for a new bus station. Many rural bus users will be coming into Bedford so this is their bus station too, not just the town's.

Other rural services are run by voluntary organisations or by volunteers.

Door to Door is a service run by Bedfordshire Rural Charities Commission which uses wheelchair-accessible minibuses for people unable to use public transport due to temporary or permanent disability. Users pay an annual fee and pay per journey which can be booked the day before, or further in advance for health-related appointments.

Several villages are served by the Villager, a local community minibus scheme, and others by the Roadrunner minibus operated by volunteers. There are weekly runs from sheltered accommodation to stores in the towns. Some villages have semi-formal schemes giving residents lifts to the shops and to health appointments.

And what about the problem of speeding traffic? Well Bedford Borough Council became the first local authority to install average speed cameras and the first were installed on the A6 at Milton Ernest, co-funded by the parish council. The motorists' speeds through the village is calculated by measurements

from a pair of cameras, so it is not sufficient for motorists to hit the brakes ahead of just one speed camera. Initially the cameras caught a considerable number of speeding vehicles owned by people living in the village!

We would dearly love to receive the income from the fines from the cameras to reinvest into road safety and transport, but unfortunately that goes to the police, so further cameras that have been installed have largely been funded by parishes themselves.

The long-term result of those first cameras has been a reduction in average speed from 40mph to 30mph – which always was the speed limit – and an unexpected by-product was a reduction in traffic noise.

Councillor Christine McHugh is the Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on Bedford Borough Council



Mayor Dave Hodgson and the team have invested in rural bus transport services

BROADBAND IS THE KEY

Peter Thornton



What is the rural economy?

It's a question we continue to ask and my answer is that the rural economy consists of businesses that exist in rural areas, rather than activity that depends upon its location in rural locations – such as farming and tourism.

Farming and tourism are important to our rural economy. The 2001 foot and mouth disease outbreak demonstrated the link between these two sectors, and we support them in much of our spending on infrastructure. Storm Desmond cut the Lake District in half when a road was breached near Grasmere. Working with local MP Tim Farron we were able to convince Highways England to take over this reconstruction and push it towards the top of their list. Cumbria has 40 million visitors every year bringing money into our local economy and the impact of Brexit is unlikely to reduce this number.

The pressure of the tourist economy does give us many unfunded challenges such as the concessionary fares conundrum whereby our county council

funds pensioners travel throughout Cumbria, for tourists with bus passes as well as for locals. It's a problem and one we are looking to address through the Local Government Association (LGA), although unlikely to be high on Westminster's list at the moment.

These sectors of tourism and agriculture are the most visible however they only provide just over 10 per cent of our county's GVA. Cumbria has around 17,000 businesses in total including Sellafield reprocessing work and BAE systems in Barrow in Furness. Are these two part of the 'rural economy'? An interesting question however they do have a considerable supply chain stimulating the local economy.

But what of the other businesses in Cumbria?

There is a company in Garsdale which has been working on town planning in Iraq. This business could be located anywhere in the world and it doesn't depend upon a rural location, but is providing valuable employment in the local area.

If you visit Eden – the sparsest district in England – you may not see this as the natural location for someone developing software for motor vehicles, but this is one of the many enterprises in this beautiful district, now under Liberal Democrat leadership. Kirkby Stephen, also in Eden, is the home of Out of

Eden, a sizeable company supplying hotels with consumable products, toiletries to sheets, via an online presence. Family owned, Out of Eden has helped dig 14 wells in rural Ethiopia giving 1650 families access to clean water, one rural area helping another.

Lakeland Ltd, located just outside Kendal, does most of its business online and exports throughout the UK and into Europe. Another family owned business which was started by three brothers living in Windermere supplying plastic wrapping for plucked chickens.

Look around Cumbria and you will find small and medium size businesses which could locate almost anywhere, but which choose to work from a rural location. Costs are lower and quality of life is immeasurably higher. All of these businesses have something in common. They all need reliable and fast broadband.

Cumbria is fortunate in having some of the most active community broadband schemes in the UK. I'm typing this piece in Longsleddale valley which was the basis for Postman Pat's Greendale.



Broadband installation in Cumbria

My internet speed is just under 1,000 MBPS, (about 20 times faster than the LGA offices in Smith Square!) as a result of a community scheme to bring fibre broadband to every home in the valley.

Our community provider was B4RN (details at www.b4rn.org.uk) who tasked us with raising around £200,000 – easier than it sounds as this is an investment call with an dividend rate of five per cent. We then managed the project in that we negotiated routes over landowners' fields, talked to householders about their installations and helped them in digging a trench to their boundary. We used contractors for the main dig, some communities have done this themselves to keep the cost down.

No more sitting looking at that spinning wheel. Software updates in minutes rather than hours. Websites that work as intended and display pictures and videos. Not forgetting Netflix when I've finished work and need to catch up on the world.

Fast reliable broadband is the most powerful intervention of all in our rural areas and the message seems to have finally penetrated the Westminster ivory towers!

Our community schemes have had help from our local Liberal Democrat councils. South Lakeland District Council used its New Home Bonus to put £20,000 towards the purchase of a roadside cabinet to act as the

hub for several hundred homes and businesses. Cumbria County Council Highways department have cooperated when it's been necessary to cross the highway. In one case they delayed a resurfacing project to fit in with the dig.

Housing, transport and broadband, the unholy trinity of rural challenges. Of these three I believe that broadband is the easiest to address and provides the greatest economic stimulus to the rural economy.

We have a government pledge to deliver full fibre broadband by 2025. We need to hold their feet to the fire on this, and at the same time we should be promoting local community schemes in our very remote areas. Liberal Democrats are the party best placed to answer these challenges and we need to reclaim our place as the rural party!

Councillor Peter Thornton is Deputy Leader of Cumbria County Council, a South Lakeland District councillor and a member of the LGA Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board

FIGHTING CLIMATE CHANGE IN RURAL AND COASTAL AREAS

Councillor Sarah Butikofer



North Norfolk is a rural coastal community on the frontline of climate change, and at the forefront of new initiatives to protect the environmentally vulnerable of our community.

Few living on the coast of North Norfolk can forget the devastating tidal surges of both 2013 and 2017. Homes disappeared over the cliffs in the course of one night, with hundreds more flooded. Main coastal routes were impassable except by boat and millions of pounds worth of damage was done to nationally important infrastructure and our economy dependent tourist facilities.

The unprecedented speed of the erosion suffered over the course of those two storms left many in the villages of Bacton and Walcott facing a very stark choice, evacuate their homes using an existing rollback programme or live in fear waiting for the next storm. But the Liberal Democrat council, working with partners, stepped up to face the challenge head on, and in collaboration with many others is in the process of completing a national first – a sandscaping protection scheme.

North Norfolk

North Norfolk has a vibrant tourist economy, a popular feature of which are our six long sandy blue flag beaches – (did I mention we have more than any other district council in the UK!); but we also play an essential role in the UK energy industry. As well as being home to one of the UK's largest gas terminals which is responsible for processing about one third of the UK's gas, we are also at the vanguard of wind energy production.

The challenges

We needed to find a way to protect not just the nationally important infrastructure, but for us critically the 300 homes and 80 businesses at risk.

Time and tide have shown that traditional timber rock and concrete sea defences are no match for mother nature and that we need to adapt to new ways of working with her to protect ourselves. Additionally, these materials known as 'hard' defences are no longer an option as they are not affordable, or sustainable and can make erosion worse, (beaches take the impact of waves much better than cliffs).

Funding was inevitably a huge challenge but having a Shoreline Management Plan in place, which sets out how our coast has to be managed and which states that 'protection of the terminal is only acceptable if it does not



Protecting local coastline by building up the beaches in North Norfolk

increase erosion at the neighbouring villages of Bacton and Walcott, meant a collaborative package needed to be put together. With delivery of the project nearing completion we are forecasting that we come in on budget of between £18 and £19 million. Approximately two thirds of the cost has been funded by the Gas Terminal Operators. Government funds of approximately £5 million have been made available through the Environment Agency to help protect the villages, and the council will contribute around £0.5 million, several other smaller groups also contributed including the villages themselves.

The scheme

Inevitably when you mention creating sea defences someone will suggest you 'talk to the Dutch they know how to do it', so we did. A similar but much larger scheme than ours, the Sandmotor has been successful in delivering coastal protection since it was built in 2011, and is now predicted to deliver protection for far longer than originally envisaged.

The scheme has seen 1.8 million cubic metres of sand pumped, placed and engineered along these beaches since the beginning of July, with pumping ending ahead of schedule. As you might imagine with that amount of sand the height and width of the beaches has increased significantly, generating not only new tourist space but new environments for wildlife to enjoy.

Lessons to learn

Working together with people who might not be obvious partners can deliver the very best result for local residents. Negotiating until you find a solution that meets the needs of all parties is not always easy.

Make sure you have local development plans in place to protect vulnerable communities against developments that might otherwise leave them exposed.

Lobby government for as long as it takes for them to listen to the needs of your community. Stick to what you know to be right, even when the going gets tough.

Make sure you have considered and mitigated all your opportunities and risks. If your plans have controversial elements talk to specialist partners and make sure they endorse and support your initiative in advance.

Councillor Sarah Butikofer is the Liberal Democrat Leader of North Norfolk District Council

PROVIDING AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN RURAL AREAS

Councillor Jonathan Brook



South Lakeland District Council covers a wide rural area of over 600sq miles and is one of England's largest districts. It is home to around 105,000 residents, and to several million tourists who visit the Lake District's many attractions each year. The image of beautiful villages nestling amongst iconic lakes and fells hides a number of significant challenges including:

- lack of affordable housing – high numbers of holiday lets and second homes
- high house prices – average house price £225,000 compared with national average £239,000 (2018)
- low wage economy – average weekly pay £501 compared with national average £571 (2018)
- ageing population – 34 per cent of population over 60 compared to national average of 23 per cent and projected to increase
- fuel poverty – 10 per cent of households in fuel poverty

- loss of young people
- rural isolation with poor transport links and access to services
- climate emergency
- reducing council funding.

Against this backdrop, the Liberal Democrat controlled council has focussed on the delivery of affordable housing as one of its main priorities, by promising to deliver 1,000 affordable homes to rent and 700 affordable homes to buy over the period 2016 to 2025. The council is on target with 457 affordable homes to rent and 121 affordable homes to buy completed by the end of 2018.

These homes are delivered by requiring 35 per cent affordable homes on all private sector developments with over nine homes and working with housing association partners. The extra rented accommodation has been delivered by working with our housing association partners, and has been achieved using funding from a combination of right to buy receipts, New Homes Bonus and the removal of the Council Tax discount from second homes.

Our plan contains a number of other ambitious housing-related targets including bringing a minimum of 70 empty homes back into use through targeted interventions between 2015 and 2020.

The council is active in providing grants to enable the delivery of affordable homes and community-led housing schemes. The Government has provided £2.3 million to facilitate such schemes, aimed at areas with a high percentage of second homes. Several projects are underway, that should see the delivery of 125 much needed homes in the coming year.

We have recently implemented a new Homelessness Strategy (2019 to 2024). This identifies four key priorities:

- homeless prevention
- increasing the supply of settled accommodation
- ensuring appropriate support is available, identifying appropriate pathways
- tackling complex needs.

Key measures include:

- not placing homeless families in bed and breakfast accommodation unless exceptional circumstances and then for no longer than six weeks
- not placing young people (under 24) in bed and breakfast accommodation.

Actions in this strategy include:

- Working with private rented sector to secure accommodation for people in housing need/at risk of homelessness.

- Bringing empty homes back into use by implementing the Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan.
- Working with public sector bodies and churches to identify any potential sites that could be used for affordable or supported housing.
- Using housing renovation grants to enable potential new schemes suitable for tenants with specific needs.
- Working with providers to enable a shared housing scheme in South Lakeland for young people.
- Working with housing associations to develop new affordable homes with the help of low-cost loans. The council has entered into a £6 million loan agreement with South Lakes Housing, our key housing association partner, to enable the delivery of additional affordable homes in more rural parts of the district – which face significant problems in meeting local need. If successful, it is hoped to increase this loan facility to £15 million.

Unfortunately, homelessness is increasing locally and this reflects the position nationally. Tackling homelessness requires a multi-agency response. There is a very clear understanding that we as South Lakeland District Council are just one part of that response. That is why we work closely with other organisations in the Strategic Homelessness Group

that includes the county council, health services and third sector organisations, right across the district.

The number of homeless presentations increased by 380 per cent to 605 last year, since 2012/13. Additionally, the number of people presenting with multiple and complex needs such as drug and alcohol dependency and mental health issues has also increased significantly. This is a major double challenge for us. Our new strategy identifies a clear way forward and identifies clear and specific actions to tackle these challenges.

The district council has also committed £461,000 in 2019/20 to create new temporary accommodation for families in the district – over and above its ongoing provision of hostel accommodation. The council has paid £113,000 in discretionary housing payments to 105 individuals over the past year to prevent them becoming homeless through evictions because of rent arrears.

We continue to look at further ways of addressing housing need from innovative building techniques such as modern methods of construction and modular homes to making further amendments to planning policy and lobbying for changes to legislation including that relating to second homes.

As Liberal Democrats we understand that secure, affordable housing is key

to so many other outcomes in life, and I am delighted that South Lakeland is showing some great examples of what can be done in a rural area.

Councillor Jonathan Brook is Deputy Leader and Portfolio holder for Housing and Development on South Lakeland District Council

TOPTIPS FOR RURAL COUNCILLORS AND CAMPAIGNERS

1. If you represent a sparsely populated rural area, do you have a plan to get a regular email sent out to supplement your existing paper delivery?
2. What are you saying on tackling rural crime levels? More information including a helpful regional breakdown can be found here: www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/aug/05/rural-crime-in-britain-hits-seven-year-high?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other
3. Are you experiencing cuts to your local youth services? Take a look at the example in this book, don't take no for an answer and get together with others in your area to develop alternative solutions.
4. How are you engaging with local farmers? Take a look at local farm survey templates and speak to a local farmer first to hear what they are concerned about.
5. Schools are key to so many of our rural communities. What are you doing to support your local village schools?
6. Are you making good use of local council resources to provide 'hubs' for small rural businesses and start-ups?
7. Could villages in your area make use of the Village Design Guides or Neighbourhood Plans to ensure local views are given weight in designing planning policy?
8. What are you doing to support local rural bus services and to listen to what the local transport needs are?
9. Do local residents have problems with rural broadband access and if so what steps will your council take to help them?
10. What steps are you taking to tackle the effects of climate change locally?
11. Are you looking at good practice to encourage more genuinely affordable homes in your area?

NOTES

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There are no vertical margin lines, text, or other markings on the page.



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