

Scrutiny Committee – 9th October 2007

9. **SSDC – Making a difference in our rural communities - A briefing note for Scrutiny Committee**

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Purpose of this briefing note

To outline current activity to draft a rural position statement, which will underpin the Councils future approach to “identify and address the needs of rural areas” (Ref: Corporate Plan objective 12), and further develop the Rural Portfolio.

Scoping the rural position statement

The SSDC corporate approach to the rural areas is assumed to include the landscape, communities and businesses not covered by Yeovil and the 10 market towns (as defined by the Market Towns Vision). Some clarification of this scope is set out below.

Defining “rural areas”

However it is important to note that this is a different approach to the Government definition of rural areas, which are settlements under 10,000. Under this definition all of South Somerset other than Chard and Yeovil are defined as rural. This is important because the use of the word ‘rural’ can cause confusion when public (including SCC) funding programmes and initiatives are often available to a wider ‘rural’ area than the SSDC definition. ‘Rural’ issues as described by the media or anecdotally can also suggest countryside and farming, and may or may not also refer to the needs of residents living in the area.

People *and* place?

Whilst our focus is on people – meeting customer needs for services, without compromising the needs of future generations - the *needs* of the rural areas are clearly a function of the economic and environmental context as much social issues. The drive towards sustainable communities would emphasise this.

In addition South Somerset’s economy is significantly affected by its landscape and natural assets, and in turn its natural assets – in particular some outstanding landscape – are significant in both size and importance. Less positive environmental aspects – notably flooding for some and traffic blight for many – are particular issues.

Are rural needs different?

A good question – and one which plenty of academic research seeks to confirm or deny. Based on our own analysis of community plans, statistics and other evidence based research; the answer is clearly yes – *and no*.

In simple terms,

- some needs are the same as in the towns / Yeovil, but appear to be harder to address in the rural areas

- some needs are relatively more significant in the rural areas (compared to the towns for example)
- some needs are not different, nor harder to address, but are still needs to be addressed, experienced by people living or working in rural areas

In addition both identifying and addressing needs can in turn be *affected* by the nature of rural areas (which by any definition are less populated than other areas)

For example:

- A commonly used method to identify need is the nationally determined, Index of Multiple Deprivation. It is recognised that even collecting data from areas below ward level (known as Super Output Areas) can miss small pockets of deprivation within rural areas. This is due to the sparse nature of rural areas and that poverty and affluence can be found very close together rather than in whole neighbourhoods of one type or another. *But we are clear that rural deprivation does exist – so how do we identify who and where this is?*
- Delivering high quality services which offer value for money to the tax payer across a large area, to over 160,000 people, and 3000 businesses and numerous community groups is challenging. South Somerset's diverse range of settlements spread over such a large geographic area is a significant challenge - where over 1/3 of our population live in settlements of less than 1000 people. The increasing costs of resources – and rising expectations – puts pressure on services to find the economy of scale which balances both aspects. *The enable, partner deliver ethos, adopted by this Council as its corporate mission statement, is fundamental to our success in the rural areas.*

Therefore the scope of the rural position statement (and Rural Portfolio) is to include:

- Residents of villages, and hamlets (those not included in the South Somerset Market Towns Vision)
- The open countryside and land based industries

Next steps

There are numerous strategies and frameworks – some new, some existing which would appear to exist to both identify rural needs and provide the means to address them – developing our corporate approach to rural areas could involve further review / involvement of these aspects - from a rural perspective.

Gaining a shared understanding **what** the rural perspective **is** – is therefore a key next step – an overview document to provide key trends and known needs is underway, and will be available in next 2 weeks.

The forthcoming theme workshops for the Sustainable Community Strategy are also most relevant to reflect on what the current and predicted rural needs are or likely to be.

Four suggested key areas of focus:

- **Establishing appropriate mechanisms to identify needs and target resources.**
 - **Key area of focus:** the South Somerset Area Vision / community planning & service planning arrangements / rural partnerships
 - **Desired outcome:** residents and businesses in rural areas get involved with and influence community / service planning and accountability; services accurately identify and have the capacity to address rural needs; partnerships

which seek to identify and address rural needs, offer value for money and can demonstrate clear added value to the local community

- **Actions to address needs which as result of being remote from main service centres, and / or in a sparsely populated area - are more challenging to deliver fairly and efficiently.**
 - **Key area of focus: Access to services strategy (for both residents and businesses)**
 - **Desired outcome:** Rural residents can easily access services through a variety of media, according to their needs, providing value for money, their relative remoteness or isolation does not in itself determine disadvantage
- **Actions which address needs locally and which have a land use or spatial impact**
 - **Key area of focus: South Somerset Local Development Framework**
 - **Desired outcome:** Our approach to land use and spatial planning reflects the needs (including any distinctive needs) of rural areas and promotes sustainable communities. The particular challenges in planning for sustainability in rural areas are overcome
- **Actions to address needs directly caused by or affected by the nature of the rural area itself.**
 - **Key area of focus:** approaches to land stewardship, landscape and environment, food and farming and land based economic development
 - **Desired outcome:** a diversified (?) and thriving land based economy, excellent stewardship of countryside, key partnerships to address needs can demonstrate added value; contributing to a balanced natural environment

Does doing all this require a new strategy?

The above 4 areas of focus suggest (to the author) that only the fourth would benefit from a published 'rural strategy' since there are clear and distinctive issues for the rural areas relating to land and landscape, from that encountered in the towns.

The others are three aspects of addressing needs which happen to be present in rural areas, which in turn are part of the broader picture within South Somerset. Whilst the needs may look (and sometimes are) different, and whilst the solutions may require a different approach – *using (and improving) the existing and emerging policy & performance frameworks is proposed to be the preferred option to identify and address rural needs.*

In summary it is recommended that further work towards the corporate objective “identify and address the needs of rural areas” is focussed on the following:

- Review the rural position statement – which will provide a broad picture of needs, and an overview of current SSDC approaches to addressing them

Followed by / in conjunction with the rural perspective applied to:

- SSDC Access to Services strategy – *implications for and impact on rural areas*
- Developing the South Somerset Area Vision – *arrangements for improved area working*
- Key partnerships and programmes affecting rural areas –*current arrangements / involvement, impact on needs of rural areas (e.g. AONBs, Leader+, Foodlinks, Rural Renaissance)*
- Economic development strategy – *impact on rural based businesses, and land based economy*

- A special focus on 'enable, partner, deliver' approaches to specific needs and issues which are / will affect rural areas – EG *affordable housing, transport & traffic, youth involvement, community safety, demographic changes (aging, economic migration)*

Some questions for comment - to assist in final draft position statement:

1. Do residents in rural areas have a right to expect the same level of services, albeit delivered in a different way?
 2. Are needs markedly different, or the same needs, which may be addressed differently?
 3. Rural proofing is one approach to service planning – where all services must be planned to reflect impact of rural nature to achieve consistency of delivery. Another is to deliver discreet rural services. Which approach makes more sense for South Somerset?
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