

Scrutiny Committee - 16th July 2009

11. The SSDC Rural Perspective

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Purpose

To introduce the concept of a 'rural impact assessment', as part of the SSDC Rural Perspective, and to provide an opportunity for the Scrutiny Committee to consider the potential use of an impact assessment within the current years work programme.

Action required

Members are asked to consider how enhancements could be made to existing processes, documents and work undertaken to accommodate the rural impact assessment.

Background

In addition to the Area Portfolio, each Area Chairman has an additional district wide theme, as set out below:

North	The Rural Perspective
South	Community Safety
East	Customers First
West	Market Towns Vision

Each theme is supported by an annual portfolio statement, as are all portfolios. In addition, part of the role of the Head of Area Development is to support the implementation of the portfolio's priorities.

A key area of interest is how to best assess the difference made to rural communities, and over the past few years this has attracted a great deal of debate at a national level. This is often referred to as an impact assessment or rural proofing.

The Commission for Rural Communities has recently published guidance on rural impact assessments, and a summary is included at Appendix A.

The SSDC Rural Perspective – Portfolio Statement and draft strategy

The Rural Perspective portfolio statement for 2009-10 includes the following main areas of work:

- To promote consideration of three priority issues through the 2009-10 scrutiny work programme.
- To promote the participation of rural communities within the Local Development Framework, and Area Forums.
- To promote the productivity, diversity and sustainability of the rural economy and environment
- To promote the successful delivery of investment programmes which aim to address the needs and issues of rural communities.

The 'Rural Perspective' portfolio does not have dedicated resources attached to it, and so uses an influencing role to champion service planning and policy development activities, both within the council, and through partnerships.

A draft rural strategy and action plan are in place to provide a stronger focus on the priorities, (using the principles of SSDC performance management) and to provide a greater opportunity for debate and accountability within SSDC.

The main aim of the rural strategy, is to provide the basis for a South Somerset 'approach' in keeping with the Council's mission to be 'an organisation consistently improving quality of life for all' and its 'enable-partner delivery' ethos.

The complete draft strategy and action plan can be brought to the Scrutiny Committee on request.

Using an impact assessment approach to improve local quality of life

A previous report to the Scrutiny Committee (November 2007) highlighted that the emphasis for the 'rural perspective' was not to create separate rural policy, but to focus on how services and policies of the Council impact upon residents and businesses living and working in the rural areas. This is largely because around one third of the total population live small villages and hamlets, and are interspersed right across the district, making isolation of the issues and needs difficult. It is recognised that there is a high level of interdependence between the rural areas, market towns and Yeovil.

It is proposed that the Scrutiny Committee consider whether the suggested approach, outlined in Appendix A, to rural impact assessments, would add value to Scrutiny topics under consideration, and in particular whether some high priority rural issues could be included in the coming year.

Suggested topic areas for use of a rural impact assessment

The list below includes some *suggested* key topic areas, arising from the review of community consultation and research, issues raised within Area Committees, and the SSDC corporate plan: -

- Affordable housing
- Access to financial, advisory and other 'well-being' services
- Transport
- Planning policies for 'sustainable rural communities'
- Retention of key rural services (village halls, Post Offices, village shops)
- Services to businesses located in rural areas

The Scrutiny Committee is asked to consider whether the current or potential work programme could incorporate any of the above topic areas, which could be considered either as a specific 'rural' topic, or through use of the rural impact assessment.

The Head of Area Development (North) will attend the meeting to make a brief presentation.
