

RURAL ENGLAND - A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

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1. Purpose

- 1.1 To report on Milton Keynes Council's response to the Government's 'Rural England - A Discussion Document'.

2. Summary

- 2.1 At its last meeting on 25 February 1999 the Consultative Assembly received a copy of the Government's 'Rural England - A Discussion Document' together with a copy of a report which launched the Discussion Document. The Document was a prelude to the drafting of a Rural White Paper. Organisations and individuals were encouraged to send their comments on the Discussion Document direct to the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions by 30 April 1999.
- 2.2 The Council's officers, in consultation with ward Councillors from the rural areas, has made its response to the Discussion Document, a copy of which is attached at **Annex A** to this report.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 The Consultative Assembly is asked to note Milton Keynes Council's response to the Discussion Document.

4. **Background**

4.1 John Prescott and Nick Brown announced on 27 November 1998 that the Government would be preparing a Rural White Paper for publication in 1999. The preparation of the White Paper is being undertaken jointly by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food with the close involvement of many other government departments and agencies.

4.2 The Government wants the preparation of the White Paper to be an inclusive process in which those with an interest in the future of Rural England can be involved. The Government therefore issued a Discussion Document in February 1999. The deadline for responses to this document was 30 April 1999. The responses received will assist the Government in drafting of the White Paper. It is not yet clear when the White Paper will be issued.

4.3 A copy of Milton Keynes Council's response is attached at **Annex A**. Representatives are invited to indicate what response their organisations have made to the Discussion Document.

5. **Issues and Choices**

5.1 This report is for information only. However, a further report will be made to this Assembly when the White Paper has been issued.

6. **Implications**

6.1 Environmental

There are a number of issues referred to in the Discussion Document, and in the Council's response, which have an impact on the environment, for example transport.

6.2 Equalities

The Government's is seeking to bring about equal opportunities for those who work or live in rural areas.

7. **Conclusions**

7.1 The Discussion Document was the initial stage in a legislative process. The Government is keen to consult widely throughout the whole process. It is not until it has had an opportunity to consider all comments received on the Discussion Document will it commence the drafting of the Rural White Paper. Further reports will be made to the Assembly as the White Paper is developed and issued.

Milton Keynes Council's Response to the Rural England Discussion Document

RURAL ENGLAND: A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

'Milton Keynes Council wishes to make the following response to the above document.

Background

During the past thirty years Milton Keynes has experienced the fastest rate of growth in the country both in its population and economic growth. The borough covers an area of 30,869 hectares and has a population of over 200,000. Whilst most of this growth has occurred in the Designated Area, the rural area accounts for approximately two thirds of the area of the borough and 20% of the total population. The incredible growth of the area has brought its own set of issues for the rural area which are referred to in the paragraphs below.

Question 1

Is the vision set out in paragraph 2.1 the right one? Are the principles set out in 2.2 to 2.6 the best way to deliver that vision? What do you see as the main challenges facing rural areas? What are the priorities for rural policy in the future, and the contribution the public, private and voluntary sectors can make?

Yes, the vision set out in paragraph 2.1 is the right one. The principles set out in 2.2 to 2.6 are supported. However, in respect of paragraph 2.5, a fair and inclusive society should incorporate a rural dimension into not just national but also regional policy. Also, recognising diversity of rural areas should recognise the range of people, not just places and circumstances.

The main challenges facing rural areas are :

- How to remain socially vital and economically viable, without sacrificing the qualities that make such areas attractive places to live, work and visit.
- How to encourage and equip all rural parish/town councils with the necessary skills to take on increased responsibility for effective decision making in their areas. Some local rural councils will be comfortable with this role, others may need further encouragement and assistance, but if local rural councils are to become more involved in decision making, strong and locally supported local councillors will be critical in achieving this objective.
- To remove the (often unhelpful) polarisation between urban and rural which characterises many debates about rural issues. As the Paper rightly points out, many rural areas, particularly in the Southeast, are not independent from the economic and social opportunities that exist in nearby urban areas and many "rural" problems are similar to those that exist in urban areas. Where

you have “near rural areas” as exist in Milton Keynes, as opposed to “far rural areas” (rural areas that are more remote), a holistic approach should be taken to policy approaches. Although it should be recognised that this may mean different rural policies for different rural areas.

- Ensuring that there is enough affordable housing to meet proven housing need, and that social care services are equally accessible at local level. For example, there is a real issue in Milton Keynes in having to bus in older people from the rural areas for day care. The day care is provided in Central Milton Keynes which may be as far away as fifteen miles from some villages.

As regards the priorities for rural policy in the future, there needs to be a coherent planning policy framework at national level to manage the inevitable changes that will arise from the reforms to Common Agricultural Policy. It is not enough just to hope that the right balance will be struck between preserving the countryside and allowing farmers to diversify to ensure their and their locality’s economic survival. Such guidance could be implemented at a local level through partnerships between local authorities and farmers in drawing up whole farm plans. In Milton Keynes the Council has had several meetings with the National Farmers Union to try and understand these issues and they have been fully involved in the Local Plan Review Consultation process. In short, all involved need to plan for this future change rather than react to it in an ad hoc manner.

A key priority that lies at the heart of many rural issues, including access to services and exclusion, is rural transport. There is a need for partnership approaches to coordinate local transport services and resources.

Question 2

What are the best ways to improve business performance and employment opportunities in rural areas? What new employment opportunities would be acceptable in the countryside? How might the right industries be encouraged to locate there? To what constraints should they be subject? Are there specific issues relating to training needs (for example, for women or for young people)? How might information and Communication Technologies and flexible working practices help rural economies?

The aim of strong and competitive rural economies is laudable, but as stated earlier, not all rural areas are the same. In “near rural areas”, the development of land for employment has to be carefully evaluated for its benefit to the area. Rural jobs do not always go to rural people and although such developments may help to sustain local facilities, there may also be costs in the form of increased in-commuting to the area.

There are no easy answers here but each area should be looked at individually and such issues discussed by representatives from local councils, local authorities and local rural businesses. The Milton Keynes and North Bucks Rural Business Network convened by the Milton Keynes Chamber of Commerce is a local new initiative that will be looking at these types of issues in Milton Keynes Borough.

At a national level there may also be a case for some sort of fiscal incentives for businesses to locate in and recruit from the more deprived rural areas.

Question 3

What can be done to enhance the competitiveness of the agri-food industries and enable the agricultural community to make adjustments for the future?

It is questionable whether we should simply enhance the short-term competitiveness of “agri-business” if this means increased use of non-sustainable practices such as intensive use of artificial fertilisers and pesticides and grubbing up hedgerows. We should aim to enhance the economic and environmental sustainability of farming and food-processing. Relating to agriculture, important concerns seem to be reform of the Common Agriculture Policy, promote far more forestry as a: crop, wildlife refuge, recreational facility. England is one of the least forested countries outside the desert belt although the natural vegetation is forest.

Encouragement / promotion of organic farming and major reduction of use of chemicals on the land - relates to genetically modified crops, still a controversial matter.

Please also see response to question 1.

Question 4

How do we decide what is most valued in the countryside and on what to target available resources and effort?

A key principle must be to involve rural communities and consult them on priorities. One of the ways, but by no means the only mechanism, is by the Local Plan process. The Local Plan could be supplemented with some form of Village/Parish plan that has been prepared with the relevant parish council and the local community. The Village/Parish plan can take the land use issues of the Local Plan and then set priorities for how to target resources in its area.

Question 5

What do you think are the main concerns for the future in the provision of services to rural communities? What do you think are the main priorities? How can these be addressed in a cost effective manner? Are there new steps that Government, local providers and rural communities themselves can take to ensure the availability of accessible services?

The main concerns have to be:

- how to make local communities more self sufficient. All too often, villages and small towns have little in the way of transport, shopping, or recreational facilities
- the future provision of services to rural communities, the existing ones should be maintained and prevented from declining – they are the lynchpin of local existing and future sustainability
- affordable housing for local people
- partnerships, joint working and co-location of services

- how to involve the Parish Councils more, possibly in partnerships amongst the smaller councils

The planning system could do more to prevent the loss of important facilities such as pubs, shops and post offices as, once they are gone, they rarely return. In the existing adopted Borough of Milton Keynes Local Plan there is a policy which allows the change of use of such facilities only where there is evidence that they are no longer economically viable and, more importantly, where all means of retaining the use have been explored.

This policy has prevented the loss of a valued local public house in one of the rural settlements within the Borough, but involved considerable resources to achieve the desired outcome. This might have been prevented if at the time (back in 1996) there had been a more explicit statement at central government level of support for local shops, post offices and pubs.

However, the survival of local facilities ultimately depends on local people to support them. This is where the role of local parish/town councils is so important in fostering a community spirit and encouraging awareness of the need for local support. Where there are small Parish Councils every encouragement should be given to the formulation of partnerships for particular service provision/facilities. Acting alone may not prove to be viable yet a partnership with adjoining parishes which have common goals might prove to be beneficial.

Consideration could be given by the Government to give parish councils some form of grant, perhaps as a SCA, to spend on housing, community, or social care services. A further way may be to broaden this Council's current policy of letting local Parish/Town Council's manage/own facilities in their area, and extend this to housing, perhaps the management/allocation of housing stock could be carried out by Parish/Town Council's within their areas, initially with the support of the housing authority.

The Government will need to recognise that, if the presence of a school in a community is deemed to be essential or important, there will be a financial cost attached to it - the smaller the school, the greater the unit costs. They will also have to take this into account when they are reporting on the number of surplus places in schools, which they are doing with an ever greater focus and intent. Some rural schools have surplus places, but the more rural they are, the greater the outcry when anyone proposes taking them out of use.

A possible solution might be, although no formal discussions have taken place by this Council on this subject, to promote federations of small rural schools with one head and governing body operating over a number of sites. The new Fair Funding regime will otherwise kill off rural schools because their individual budgets will not cover their new responsibilities.

The other points are about better understanding of how ICT could revolutionise learning and employment in the country, provided we could ensure access and training. Almost anything will/can be done on-line. Allan Willett, the Chairman of SEEDA, has been making the point in his visit to Milton Keynes that one of the fastest growth areas in America is rural Nebraska where people are setting up global companies at home fuelled by the Internet.

This could be a more productive vision than just thinking you need a comprehensive and prohibitively expensive public transport system to get people to employment/learning institutions. Lap tops/ICT is much cheaper!

The potential tension between maintaining local services and a strict application of the sequential test to locations for housebuilding should be recognised. In some villages the price for maintaining a viable school or post office may be to allow more development. It is important that local people are involved in deciding whether and how such balances are struck.

Question 6

What are the most effective ways to help turn around the problems of communities in decline? Are there circumstances in which managing the consequences of decline will be the appropriate course of action? How can community organisations, such as women's groups, be supported?

Main elements of a viable rural community could be said to be church, school, pub, shop, post office, surgery.

Much greater use of EB grants from landfill tax should be examined.

How to discourage use of villages as dormitories for commuters. There needs to be an increase in the availability of starter homes for young people from rural areas. At the moment they are being 'priced out' of their areas and forced to look to other areas. This in turn means that the Village School will continue to decline as young families move from the area.

Cathy McCormack, a leading tenants rights campaigner, mentioned in her speech to the Chartered Institute of Housing's Dundee conference that "If we are really serious about including the excluded it has got to take political will and it is going to take money. It is going to take real investment and distribution of wealth. We cannot tackle poverty or exclusion unless we tackle the real causes."

Question 7

Does more need to be done to ensure that national initiatives fully respond to rural needs? Are there other measures to be taken to tackle problems of social exclusion in rural England? Are particular measures needed to give a voice to and help groups such as women, ethnic and minority groups and those with special needs?

Need to develop measures of need that take into account dimension of rural isolation to inform national policy making. Services providers need to co-operate to pool information so that services/information can be targeted to individuals and communities in need. There is a need to study scope for more affordable housing and how to achieve it.

Young people in rural areas are severely disadvantaged in that they have to rely on family transport or virtually non-existent public transport to gain access to services/facilities, particularly in the evenings.

The Government should consider developing opportunities for those in disadvantage both in small pockets of deprivation in the countryside and in areas of widely dispersed deprivation. Whilst wealthier rural residents can sometimes find alternative supplies and service provision, those suffering deprivation are particularly adversely affected.

Question 8

How can objectives of improving recreational and tourism opportunities be met sensitively, and balanced with the needs of small communities, individual businesses and the environment?

Encourage open farms and school farm links.

Promotion of farmhouse holidays, barnhouse accommodation, horse trails.

Right to roam consequences, will need a new generation of signage.

How to keep recreational four-wheel drives off non-surfaced tracks and open country, however, in some circumstances, the use of low grade set-aside farmland for recreational 4x4 driving could reduce pressure on vulnerable "boats" (byways open to all traffic) and provide a financially viable (if environmentally questionable) alternative land use.

Cultural matters are low on the list again. The rural hinterland adds to the mixture of unique local cultural resources and distinctiveness of Milton Keynes. It is therefore something that should be considered in the Rural strategy.

The cultural needs of the rural community could not really be said to be significantly different around Milton Keynes than within the new town boundary (not in the same way that Glasgow might differ from the Highlands or Islands for instance), but this is an assumption that could be tested. A piece of focused research could be undertaken into the cultural identities and needs of rural communities and how these might be different from those of city or town dwellers.

The "Milton Keynes identity" issue is important here with a small indigenous population still existing in the surrounding countryside, and the last days of a specific, local, rural cultural identity present. It would make a lot of sense to record and map this, not only in terms of preservation, but to facilitate and empower rural communities to manage these changes without losing a sense of their own identity. So, another suggestion would be arts/culturally based documentation, local history and community capacity building projects.

Question 9

Is the distribution of responsibilities between the different levels of Government right? Is there more that could be done to improve performance and integrated programme delivery? What mechanisms might be introduced, either in Central Government, or at other levels to ensure that rural issues are considered in policy-making?

Question 10

What is the right balance between recognising the different nature of rural areas whilst ensuring a consistent approach to developing and delivering policies across the country? How can connections and understanding between town and country be strengthened? How should policies reflect particular interdependencies (such as between market towns and their surrounding areas; or between consumers and what farmers produce)?

The answers to questions 9 and 10 relate to each other. As the Paper acknowledges, it comes at a time of great changes to the organisational framework for delivery of rural policies. This has the potential for major improvements to be made to the present system – but this new framework will need some time to bed in before it is apparent whether further changes need to be made. It is

hoped that the combination of the Countryside Agency and the Regional Development Agencies would ensure that the concerns expressed in Question 10 can be addressed, although much can be done at the local level to improve connections between town and country.

There needs to be joined up working from top to bottom i.e. Central Government - Regional - District - Parish. With each level also consulting with its partners and with communities of interest and geographical communities, this would help to ensure that rural circumstances are always taken into account in policy-making. This Council established a number of years ago a Parish Partnership Convention which set out to foster a spirit of co-operation and consultation with Parish Councils, this is being continually developed and is working well. It could be argued that more powers should be given to the most local level of government i.e. Parish Councils. They represent their local communities, are most aware of needs within their areas and therefore should be given powers to be able to address those needs. However, at the present time most Parish Councils are operated on a voluntary basis, both Clerks and Councillors are already finding difficulty in coping any additional workload on this basis. Many Parish Councillors can only commit their time at weekends and evenings for which they are not recompensed by way of allowances. It is noticeable that many Parish Councils cannot attract Councillors and that many Clerks are resigning because of the strains that are placed upon them e.g. new Audit Regulations. Consideration therefore needs to be given to putting Parish Councils on a more professional footing if they are to represent their local communities to the full.

This Council has established a Rural Affairs Committee which anyone with an interest in rural issues may attend. These meetings are well attended and are held three times per year. However, further attention needs to be given as to how consider the interdependency of both the urban and rural areas within the Borough.

Milton Keynes Council, along with a number of other organisations, have been involved in the production of a draft Rural Strategy for Buckinghamshire which should be approved in the near future. The Strategy has an economic, environmental and social perspective. Lead organisations have been identified for each of the Actions identified. It is recognised that some of the actions would be relatively inexpensive and might be undertaken as part of existing programmes and introduced quite quickly if they have not already been so. Others would be expensive and would take a considerable time to achieve. It is thought that the production of a Rural Strategy for the area, based on a multi-agency approach, will prove to be helpful. Perhaps it might prove useful if all areas of England were required to produce such a document, possibly being co-ordinated at a regional level.'